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JUNE

DIME



DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

**THE DEADDEST
BRIDE IN TOWN!**
by **FRANK WARD**



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REDUCE

MOST ANY
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Vol. 67

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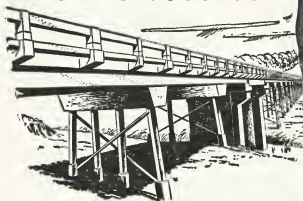
A quick look at the coming issue's star novelette.

The next issue out June 4th.

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READY for the RACKETS

A Department

Dear Detective Fans:

Swindlers being the slippery lot they are, it's a bit dangerous to try to predict just what they'll do next. But one thing you can say for sure: wherever there is a person—man, woman or child—with a nickel in his pocket, there also will be a con boy with a scheme to take it away.

You can live in the quietest little town in the country, or off by yourself like a hermit, and you still won't be safe. Some racketeer is sure to find you out and give you the chance to make him richer. Or you can hide in the thronging crowds of the city and still get fleeced—for the man right next to you has got a dodge to take you off your guard. East, West, North or South, these boys are everywhere. There's only one way to escape them. Know your rackets so well they can't make you bite!

With that end in mind, we bring you the latest roster of rackets. There are some very clever schemes in this lot, too. So read 'em and beware!

The Rat Keeps the Cheese

Dear Sir:

My father was approached by a well-dressed, friendly stranger who said he was contacting all the Italian people in town. "I have a terrific bargain in genuine, imported Italian cheese to offer you," he said. After sampling it, my father was so pleased with the quality that he bought three 25 lb. rounds of it.

When he got home and tasted it again, he found that it was absolutely inedible; it wasn't even cheese.

The swindler, when he had offered my father a sample, had actually cut a bite from one of the heads of cheese, but the gadget he used for cutting had contained a hidden piece of genuine cheese. The switch was made so cleverly, there was no reason to doubt the sample.

You can be sure my father hasn't bought any more "bargains" from strangers.

R. F.
Eric, Pa.

All Washed Up

Dear Sir:

We live near a busy neighborhood shopping center. One Friday afternoon, shortly after five p.m., my husband and I were driving home from the supermarket with a load of week-end supplies. As we passed the entrance to an alley, just to the rear of a large electrical appliance store, we noted a delivery truck parked at the alley entrance. Two husky-looking men were unloading used washing machines into the alley.

We stopped the car because of the congestion of traffic, and watched them finish dumping their load. Several other shoppers had also gathered around. Pretty soon, the taller of the two men remarked to the other, in a voice loud enough to be heard by all passers-by: "Looks like my partner has closed up for the day, Bob."

"Well, open up the back door anyway, Joe," said the shorter man. "We'll just shove these machines into the store room and head for home."

The taller man began searching his pockets for keys. "Musta left my keys in the office. Can't get that door open now!"

"Well, whatta we gonna do now?" bellowed Bob. "Drag 'em all back up on the truck? Not me! It's past my quittin' time now!"

By this time quite a few shoppers had stopped to listen to the argument.

"Well," answered the one called Joe, "we can't just leave 'em here in the street all night." He stood scratching his ear as if in a quandary. Suddenly he seemed to get an idea. "Tell you what, Bob! Maybe some of these folks would like to take them off our hands at a real bargain price. They're all trade-ins; machines we picked up from folks who got their new washers today."

"Say, boss, that's an idea!"

"Tell you what I'll do, neighbors," said Joe, facing the crowd. "Now, you all know that when we sell a new washer, we allow the customers a cash discount of \$25 on their old ones. Each and every one of these machines actually costs me \$25 in cold, hard cash. I'll sell them to anyone who can use one at a \$10 loss, just to keep from re-loading them back on the truck. How about it folks?"

He saw me eyeing one of the machines, and turned his attention to me.

"Not a one of 'em worth less than \$50.00. Sure, they got a few scratches and the motors need a little oilin', but they're the biggest bargains you'll get in a long, long time. Especially the one you're looking at, little lady. That's

(Continued on page 8)



She'll be your "Dream Girl" You'll "Bewitch" her with it

Daring
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"DREAM GIRL" She'll look alluring, breathtaking, enticing, exotic. . . . Just picture her in it. . . beautiful, fascinating SEE-THRU sheer. Naughty but nice. . . . It's French Fashion finery. . . with peek-a-boo magic lace. . . . Gorgeously transparent yet completely practical (washes like a dream. . . will not shrink). Has lacy waistline, lacy shoulder straps and everything to make her love you for it. A charm revealing Dream Girl Fashion. . . . In gorgeous Black.

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Out of the pages of the Arabian Nights comes this glamorous sheer Harem pajama. You'll look beguiling, alluring, irresistible, enticing. You'll thrill to the sleek, clinging wispy appeal that they will give you. He'll love you for transplanting you to a dream world of adoration centuries old. Brief figure hugging top gives flattering appeal to its daring bare midriff. *Doubled at the right places*, it's the perfect answer for hostess wear. Billowing sheer bottoms for rich luxurious lounging. He'll adore you in this charm revealing Dream Girl Fashion. In wispy sheer black.

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Daring Bare-back
She'll be en-
tranced with it



Your Dream girl will be an exquisite vision of allurements, charm, fascination and loveliness in this exotic, bewitching, daring bare-back filmy sheer gown. It's delicate translucent fabric (washes like a dream) will not shrink. Have Paris at home, with this cleverly designed halter neck that ties or unties at the flick of a finger. Lavishly laced midriff and peek-a-boo bottom. She'll love you for this charm revealing Dream Girl Fashion. In exquisite black sheer.

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 Address
 City State

(Continued from page 6)

Mrs. Brandon's trade-in. Sold her the machine myself just two years ago. It's still good as new but her husband gave her a new one for her birthday."

I consulted with my husband. Although we gave our washing to a laundry, I could use a washer for things that I usually did by hand. I felt I could get more than \$15 worth out of it. We decided to take the machine, and several other shoppers whose cars were parked close by also made purchases. The kindly men helped us push it into the back seat of our car.

Everything was fine until Saturday morning when my husband went down to the basement to paint up the scratches and oil the machine. Then I received the good news—it was only a shell. Whoever had been selling washing machines for \$15 apiece, had removed the only valuable parts. There was no motor!

When irate complainants stormed into the appliance store on Saturday, they learned that Mr. Joe and Mr. Bob had no connection whatsoever with that company and had merely parked in the rear for effect.

Mrs. Selma Schlafman
University City, Mo.

Floor Plan

Dear Sir:

Although this incident occurred ten years ago, my husband still chides me about the time I swallowed hook, line and sinker. Our financial circumstances at that time was what made me accept this so-called bargain. Here is what happened:

My husband and I had completed building a 12 by 16 foot kitchen. Several weeks later two men pulled in our driveway in a panel truck. They were selling linoleum. They explained that they were on their way back to their office and had one roll of a well-known brand of linoleum, measuring 12 by 30 feet. If I was interested they would let me have it for a "real bargain," providing it was a cash deal. They unrolled it in the front yard and measured it, but I only had \$7. Sensing they had a sucker on the line, they started casting. Did I have a diamond ring or watch to put with the money? To make a long story short, I offered them my seventeen-jewel Elgin wrist watch, on which we still owed several payments. But it was no deal and they left.

About an hour later they returned and were all apologies for not accepting my previous offer. The deal was completed and they carried the linoleum into the house and drove off.

Several days later my husband and a helper prepared to lay the linoleum and packed it out in the yard to unroll it and cut it for the kitchen and bathroom. We figured there was enough for both.

They didn't have to measure or cut—that had already been done. Evidently between the time they first measured it for me and their return the second time, they had cut and sold some twenty-odd feet. The piece they sold me measured less than nine feet, not even enough for the kitchen.

We immediately contacted the Better Business

Bureau, but with no license number or name to give them, we realized that I had been swindled, but good. We laugh about it now, but when we made the four payments on the watch we didn't laugh!

Mrs. Albert Middleton
Grand Rapids, Mich.

Four and Twenty Pies

Dear Sir:

Trying to help an unemployed husband meet expenses for our family of four made me a victim to what I consider an unique racket.

A man came to our home and represented himself as the agent of a pie company. He said that his company specialized in home-made pies which had a ready sale because of their better flavor. The agent explained that his company did not operate a baking plant but had their pies baked for them by housewives at home. Many housewives, he said, were earning extra money for themselves in this manner. Did I want to become one of their pie bakers?

Naturally, with a husband out of work and two kids in school, I agreed to bake pies for him and earn some needed cash.

He went out to his car and brought in a set of pie tins, a booklet of recipes and a contract for me to sign. The agent explained that the pie company would furnish a set of the necessary type of pie tins and complete recipes. As an evidence of good faith I would have to deposit \$5.00 with the agent. This amount would be returned to me after I baked the first batch of pies for his company.

The company guaranteed in the contract I signed to take at least two dozen of my pies each day, and the agent assured me that they would, of course, take more. He blandly informed me that the amount of money I could make baking pies depended entirely on the amount I wanted to bake. When the agent departed with my money in his pocket, he told me that the company truck would be around about five p.m. the next day for my first batch of pies.

I decided to start off with 24 pies and I proceeded to buy materials for that number. I had a busy time baking the following day and at five p.m., 24 tasty-looking pies were lined up on my kitchen table.

Needless to say, no truck arrived to pick them up. We found out later there was no truck and no company.

Mrs. Alma Raymond
Sumter, S. C.

Oh, You Horrible Doll!

Dear Sir:

I was taken in by "the most beautiful doll in the world."

No, she wasn't five feet two, eyes of blue—she was one of those dolls you put under the Christmas tree for that little minx who calls you Daddy.

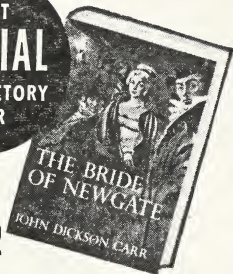
The ad looked so good: "Baby Blue Eyes, Miracle Skin Doll with Magic Hair, Regular \$12.95 value for \$5.95." The picture showed a

(Continued on page 112)



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OR

THE BRIDE OF NEWGATE by John Dickson Carr
(Published at \$3.00)

Dick Darwent, ex-fencing master, was waiting in a dark cell of Newgate Prison—waiting to be hanged. While Dick waited for the hangman, Lady Carolina Ross, rich, cold and beautiful, prepared a champagne breakfast to celebrate her marriage to him, a marriage which would cost her fifty pounds, and which would be ended an hour after it had begun.

But a shot through a bathroom window, where a lovely lady sat in a tub of milk—a riot in the opera, led by champion pugilists—a pistol duel at dawn—and a mysterious coachman, whose cloak was shiny with graveyard mold changed everything! As did Napoleon Bonaparte!

John Dickson Carr, a master of the detective novel, now proves himself to be a master of the historical novel in this thrilling story of London in 1815 and the gaudy characters that made up its world of fashion, and its underworld.

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By FRANK WARD



It was an animal face, not quite
sane. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Adieu, My Sweet

THE glare from my headlights raked along the untrimmed borders of snarled underbrush, and after I had gone a mile down the beach road, spread wider across reaches of sandy depressions. I fancied I could hear the sea, hidden out beyond the dunes. I stopped the car at the end of the road, and sat holding my breath and listening to the sound of the waves and inhaling that sharp, tangy smell that comes from salt water and sea grass and clean sand, baked after a day's drying in the sun. I got out of the car and started walking.

In five minutes I was on the crest of the



"A short life and a gay one" was luscious Nancy's motto. And in no time at all she'd left her husband . . .

THE DEADDEST BRIDE IN TOWN!

promontory overlooking the beach cottage, a square, solid blot against the phosphorescence of surf breaking in a long irregular line along the strip of beach. I went carefully down the slope of the dune, filling my shoes with sand. The sand knotted itself into the dampness of my socks until I was limping a little as I came up to the house from the far side.

A brisk breeze had curled in from the sea and whipped the fog away in patches. I stood with my legs braced, shoes digging into the sand; and with some inner sense that I should have left in town, I thought I could hear the muted, delicate strains of a waltz. I stood with my mouth warped in an agonized grin that would gain no humor if I lived a hundred years, my mind wandering in a dark place so far in the past now that it might never have existed. Standing there I could hear the other sounds, the other voices, the muffled tone of a man speaking into a phone.

"I think you should know, kid. A guy like you, he's wasting his time. She's out of your league, boy. You wanted a nice girl, and what did you get? They're only nice girls when their husbands don't walk in at the wrong time, kid, and the two bucks for the license doesn't matter a damn. Go look for yourself, kid."

I'd listened to the click of the phone and shrugged. Then the shrug grew colder and stiffer and the doubt crept in. And I couldn't keep away from here, the rendezvous, hidden away from the road. Hidden away from all the husbands who are the last guys to know until they get a phone call from a man who doesn't leave a name or a reason for telling you.

The breeze fanned gently against the back of my neck. I shivered and closed my eyes for a moment and heard her voice again, soft with a soft harshness that went down into you and into your spine and turned your stomach to water and made you weak in the legs, and I wondered what I was doing here. Me, Peter O'Mara, thirty-one and less than a year married, with a gun in my pocket and a dead spot in my head where my mind used to be.

I took the gun out of my pocket and looked at it queerly, the way a man would look at an axe if he woke up in bed and found one in his hand. Guns were not my business. I held this one out away from me,

slackly, and began walking across the sand toward the cottage.

The door had always had a warp to it, so that you had to lift it to open it, and now it hung ajar an inch or two, and the sand had drifted over the sill. It crunched grittily underfoot as I stepped into the darkness, and the air was flat and stale, as if too many cigarettes had smoldered out there, as if too many sick memories had crawled there to die. There was utter silence in the room. No music, no soft, harsh voice, nothing at all.

I was shaking all over; this was my beach cottage, *our* beach cottage. I walked around the room, throwing quick, darting pools of light in front of me with my flash, although I knew from memory every stick of furniture in the place, because I had paid for it, month after month, until it was mine. I stopped by one wall, my foot crunching on something that lay near the rim of the rug, and I clicked the light switch. Nothing happened.

From the bathroom there echoed the soft purl of water flowing quietly. I threw the beam of light across the room. Water was moving almost silkily from under the closed bathroom door and widening in a fan toward the edge of the rattan rug. The light struck reflections off glasses on the cocktail table in front of the lounge. There were two glasses on coasters with the remnants of two drinks still in them.

I moved my foot and bent over and picked up the dark green swizzle stick my foot had broken in two. Dark green, with a lighter green mermaid. The mermaid's eyes were brilliants that winked at me knowingly, as if she had seen the visitor here and was secretly amused.

I held it tightly in my fist, until the ragged edges of plastic bit into my flesh; it was a very special swizzle stick, my wife's gesture to her drinking public. I twisted it until it broke with another quiet snap and threw the ends toward the fireplace. I leaned one aching shoulder against the wall and stared at the glasses on the table. Under the table lay a pair of beach sandals that were still damp and a bottle that had once held my Scotch and was now empty. Cigarette stubs and ashes lay in confusion on the glass table top. I looked at all this and the doubt rose up in my throat and was no longer a doubt, and I felt sick.

The flash snapped off, leaving me in darkness, and in that darkness I went across the room, toward the closed door with its tide of water growing larger, so that it slopped under my shoes. I pushed the door with a stiff finger and it opened slowly. I shone the light in, the beam flowing unevenly over green tiles, jumping from the chrome fittings, until it rested on the tub.

She lay curled up modestly there, her back half-turned, but with her head crooked stiffly on her neck, so that she seemed to be blinking up into the beam of light that wavered over the still green water. I looked at her as a man would look at a rock on the beach, and the emotion was dead in me now, and I felt nothing that I had expected to feel. I reached down gingerly and touched her shoulder and let my hand trail in the water. Both were cold. She had been dead for some time. I reached over and turned off the water.

THE house was very quiet then. I moved the light down the length of her body. There was a tight hard core of revulsion in my stomach, that I could look upon her so callously, as if she weren't my wife, as if I had never known her before she became this dead thing that lay curled up in the turgid water under my light.

There were no marks on her. Only the long brown cord snaking into the water told the fashion of her dying, and under the water the ivory gleam of plastic and glass that had been a bedside radio. A radio that had once been bolted firmly in wall brackets, so that nothing like this could ever happen to her. One of the brackets, gleaming brass and chipped white enamel, lay on the floor by the tub. I picked it up and slipped it in my pocket, without really knowing what I was doing.

I shifted and closed my eyes to blot her out, just for a moment. Then I went out quickly, smearing my damp hands against the wood of the door where I had touched it, as if it weren't the most natural thing in the world for a husband to leave his mark on the house he owned. I felt, distantly, shame and fear, and a peculiar chill, as if someone had opened a door on a dark and dreary place.

I stood in the middle of the darkened living room, wanting to feel sicker than I did, wanting desperately to hurt as much as

a man should when a part of his life is suddenly wrenched away from him without warning. I wanted to feel fury, too, as I had felt it when I heard from the man who liked to spend nickels on blind husbands. I felt nothing but that peculiar coldness, that could have been shock or the last dregs of an illusion that had clung pitifully through ten months of a marriage that had taken a pitifully short time to become a mockery.

My wife was dead. I was a widower at thirty-one. I was a guy standing alone in a dark room that had grown these last few months to become nothing more than a way station for semi-literate drunks who were always just passing by, or just dropping in for a drink, or just staying for the weekend, so that I never started the long drive out from the city without wondering what bum would be draped over my sofa, or what couple I'd stumble over as I walked down the dune toward the cottage. I was home, and as usual there was nothing there. And when I thought about it, in a confused way, I wondered if perhaps it was because I'd put so little there myself.

I scrubbed my eyes with the back of my hand and reached into my pocket for the inevitable cigarette, and touched the cold, still-wet piece of wall bracket that had held the radio to the wall. I touched it, and for the first time the fear moved out into the open. Suddenly the place was no longer bearable.

I shivered and walked over to the door and stepped outside, lighting the cigarette. I closed the door firmly behind me and walked slowly back the way I had come, feeling very tired and not thinking at all. I came around the bend in the road, reaching automatically for my car keys, and saw the wet gleaming bulk of my car against the lighter backdrop of the sand. I had gone a few paces toward it before I realized that there were two people inside.

They paid me as much attention as if I had come as part of the equipment. There was the usual combination of man and woman, and when I yanked open the driver's door and leaned in and looked at them over the top of the front seat, a wave of bonded air hit me in the face like a swamp-er's towel. I jarred my elbow on the horn ring and the man, whose mouth had been glued to the girl's, gave a startled grunt

and jerked his head around, peering at me blearily. He had a familiar face, one I had seen somewhere before. I seemed to recall not having wanted to see it again, which would make him one of the people Nancy usually asked out for a week or so. Nothing had happened since then to change that feeling.

I said, "Hello, Eric. Enjoying my car?"

His mouth gaped at me foolishly. His face loomed pale and blotchy in the darkness, shot with wrinkles that had never known a day's worry. It was a young face, but the revenue stamps on it were age-old and very wise, as a dirty joke is wise. He didn't know me at first. I snapped on the dome light and smiled at him, a friendly smile that hurt the corners of my mouth.

I was beginning to shake a little in the upper arms, as if I had been holding a great weight over my head. I could still hear very plainly the purring babble of water trickling over the edge of a bathtub. I was a guy who had just lost a wife, you understand. I said coldly, "Eric, I don't give a damn that your old man is the mayor. Get the hell out of my car before I plant a parking ticket on your face. Go look for a dry sand-dune."

"Good ol' Pete," he said grinning at me foolishly. "You got a drink, good ol' Pete?"

I was still smiling my tender smile. I wrapped one hand around the back of his neck and jerked him forward and let him spill sideways over the back of the front seat. He reached automatically for his tie and found he wasn't wearing one; that threw him. He gurgled as a baby gurgles at the sight of his bottle. I slapped him hard across the face, enjoying my work; and then the woman, whom I had ignored, moved. She moved with a sort of leisurely purpose, as if she had been doing some thinking and had reached a decision.

The bottle hit me glancingly across the side of the head, just above the ear. Dimly I heard it shatter, and dimly I thought I heard somebody laughing a laugh that might have been air going out of a tire, a soft, hissing giggle that seemed very unhealthy. I slid down the side of the car, trying to keep my hands up to protect my head and pawing nothing but cold wet metal, and then I rolled over on my face in the damp sand. I could hear the laughter fading, and when the laughter had died I could

hear nothing at all but the tumultuous roaring in my head. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Tell It to the D.A.

THERE was a thin fine haze in the room. I sat on an uncomfortable wooden chair and kept my eyes focused on the door through the haze and said nothing, and after a time I stopped looking at the door and turned my attention, for what it was worth, to District Attorney Brady Devlin, behind the desk.

He was a hard little man, with a small man's instinctive quickness of motion. His close-cropped hair shone like worn gun-metal, and his eyes, watching the girl who sat across the desk from him, were at once blue and lazy and speculative. He had a narrow even mouth. He looked like a man who would know when to keep it shut.

He picked up the piece of wall bracket I had found in my own bathroom, where my wife had died, and examined it strangely, as if it had crawled there of its own accord. Then he looked at me and let the bracket fall on the desk blotter. It fell with a quiet thud that did nothing to disturb the boredom of the police stenographer, who was languidly running one dirty thumb over the end of a blunt pencil and yawning with his mouth wide open. The girl gave a convulsive little leap. She was a girl I had never seen before. Devlin turned his head and stared at her thoughtfully.

"Bayliss," he said in his gray gentle voice. "I seem to place that name. Give me a clue."

The girl cleared her throat and threw a hurried glance at me and blushed suddenly. She began rubbing the tips of her fingers together, as if they were cold. "My father was with the traffic division," she said slowly. "Until three months ago. He was crossing a dark street on a rainy night. The car didn't stop afterwards."

She made an impatient gesture with one hand. "I'd like to go home now, Mr. Devlin. There isn't any more need for me here. I've told you all I know about this."

"Sure," Devlin said. He looked at her obliquely. "They ever find the driver of that car, Miss Bayliss?"

She shook her head.

"Too bad," Devlin said. "Before you go, I'd like to run through it again, quickly. Then you can sign a statement and we'll wrap this thing up. Just one or two points I don't quite get. For instance, you say you were driving back from a party at Mayor Morgan's house—" here he cocked his head to one side and gave me a quick look—"in the company of the mayor's son and a woman named Kate Ambruther, the woman who hit O'Mara here with a bottle. Why did you turn off down the beach road?"

The girl made a quick gesture toward her hair, dark brown with a lighter streak running down the part, and kept her eyes away from mine. She said, "Eric was just drunk enough to want to go calling. He said he knew Mrs. O'Mara quite well, that she'd be glad to see them and they could get another drink there. There wasn't anything I could do to stop them."

"Uh-huh. And when you were almost at the end of the road the car stalled in some loose sand and both the Morgan boy and the woman got out and started walking to the cottage, leaving you in the car."

"Yes."

"Had you ever been down that road before?"

"No. I never had any reason to. Dad and I lived at a place just a little way up the beach, around the headland, but I'd never had any reason to—do any visiting."

Devlin pushed the wall bracket on his desk with one blunt finger. He said, "You waited perhaps twenty minutes, trying to free the car, and when that failed you began walking down the road toward the highway to see if you could get any help. Why not follow the Morgan boy and have him help you?"

Her lip curled. "He wasn't in any condition to help anyone."

"I see. And you had gone a little way when you heard the Ambruther woman screaming. What then?"

"I turned and began running back toward the beach." She paused and bit her full underlip and tried to keep her eyes on her hands, which were moving slowly on her lap, as if they were powers to themselves and had no part of her will. "In front of the cottage I found another car parked. Then I saw Mr. O'Mara."

Devlin grunted at the stenographer, who

got up and then walked out, still yawning.

"He was doing what?"

"Crawling. He wasn't far from his car. There were pieces of broken bottle near him and he had a bad gash on his head, just behind the ear."

"And you'd say the wound was fresh?"

"It was still bleeding, if that's what you mean."

"That's what I mean," Devlin said softly.

HE LEANED back and stretched. "Well," he said. "The Ambruther woman denies having hit anyone that night. She screamed when she and Eric Morgan found Mrs. O'Mara's body in the tub. She admits she was very drunk, but not drunk enough to sling bottles at people." He looked at me. "Or do you really care?"

"I don't give a damn," I said wearily. I was getting a little fed up with the efficient district-attorney's line he was pulling. I wondered who he thought he was impressing.

"All right," he said finally. "One thing more, Miss Bayliss. What happened to your escort at this party?"

"Eric was it," she said, without bitterness. She stood up and began pulling on her gloves. There was a sturdiness to her and an expression on her face that said she was going out of there, Devlin or no. I wished I could go with her.

Devlin said to me, "Does all this tally with what you remember?"

I said, in a rusty voice, "Yes."

"You knew when Miss Bayliss found you that your wife was dead?"

"Yes."

"Yet you didn't say anything to Miss Bayliss about that? You didn't tell her you knew why this Ambruther woman had screamed?"

"No."

"I see," he said, in the tone of one who doesn't. "How do you explain that?"

"I don't explain it," I said. "I wasn't thinking at the time. I had just been conked with a whiskey bottle, and I wasn't thinking about anything much at all but the pain in my head."

"Uh-huh," Devlin said again. He looked at the girl for a long time. "One thing more, Miss Bayliss, and on a more personal scale. I can't quite place a girl like you and Mayor Morgan's son, if you'll pardon my

saying so. I'd think you'd mix like whiskey and sand."

She flushed a little more. "I don't think I have to answer that," she said. "I don't think that has anything to do with this, Mr. Devlin. I think it might have something to do with the fact that you're obviously out for the mayor's scalp." She picked up her purse and started walking across the room.

At the door she paused and looked back at me, her face worried. It was a nice face, but it would never launch a magnum of champagne or throw a city out of gear. There was a slight, crescent-shaped scar at the corner of one eye that gave her a perpetually quizzical look. I thought her mouth was too wide, but I wasn't in any condition to criticize. She nodded to me and I nodded to her, and she went out, closing the door quietly behind her. I could hear the uneven clicking of her heels on the marble floor.

"Well," Devlin said at last, in his soft, impersonal voice. "That's that. I'm sorry about it, Peter, but accidents like that do happen. They happen every day; I suppose they'll go on happening. You want me to handle the details of the burial?"

"You think it would be a good idea if I went away for awhile?" I asked him softly.

He shrugged and tucked a pipe between his teeth and blew through it gustily, making a strange whistling noise. "You don't have to tell me that this is a pretty hard kick in the teeth, Peter. I know how I'd feel, if it happened to me. I knew Nancy pretty well, in the old days. We used to have fun together."

"Sure," I said. "Lots of people used to have fun with Nancy, I'm told."

He winced and studied the palm of his hand. He had a fine profile for a politician, a fighter's profile with a beaten-down nose that would still be attractive to women and a jut to the jaw that went well with three-column headlines and lots of fresh black type. I had been his purveyor of fresh black type for a long time. I knew him as well as he would let anyone know him. I even liked him a little, the way you will like a man with the god of ambition behind his eyes and a firm step toward the altar of success.

"Do I have to cry murder?" I asked him quietly. "Do I have to get up and yell it? Or have you got a reason for not wanting

to hear that word mentioned right now?"

He looked at me sharply, his mouth tightening.

"Perhaps I don't have to tell you about this," I said. "But it takes a heavy hand to tear a radio off a wall when it's been screwed on with three-inch screws. Why the hell do you think I went to all the trouble of screwing it on, Brady? Because I didn't want a radio falling into the water when my wife was in the tub."

I watched him carefully. I said, "I know what you're trying to pass over, Brady. I won't do it for you."

"All right," he agreed mildly. "You don't have to do anything for me. I didn't ask, did I? But accidents happen, Pete; they happen all the time. Look at the statistics."

I told him what he could do with his statistics. "They don't happen like that to women like Nancy. I've told you once. I'll go through it again. She was with somebody, somebody she knew very well. She had drinks with him, she smoked cigarettes with him." The blood swung dizzily around in my brain and the sickness came back. "Get me, Brady. I don't care who knows it, now. I guess most of my friends knew it anyhow. But she was my wife, still my bride, even; and for some reason that sticks with me. Just enough so that no one can do that to her and go his way. Just that much. Your politics be damned, Brady. Your investigation of the mayor be damned too."

DEVLIN had stopped studying his palm. He put his hands down flat on the desk and gave his pipe an extra jerk with his teeth. His face was pale except for the twin spots of color over the cheekbones. His skin looked as if it had been scrubbed hard.

"Okay, kid," he said mildly, not looking at me. "If you want it that way, you can push it that way. But you're forgetting a couple of minor points. One, she could have slipped and grabbed the radio and pulled it into the tub with her, three-inch screws and all. Two, you're in a machine, Peter. You go around and around with the rest of us, and you can call it a dirty machine and a dirty business, and you can hate the guts of the people who crank the machine, but you'll go right on being a part of it, just the same as the rest of us. You get two

thousand a year out of us, Peter; not much, but more than a lot of City Hall reporters can pull down on the side. You get it for playing ball with us when somebody picks up the bat. That doesn't make you any different from a lot of other reporters who do exactly the same thing. It's no different anywhere else. Maybe it wouldn't work so well if it were different, and maybe the voters wouldn't like us any better if we played it right across the board for them.

"But I'll tell you this, too. The machine takes care of its own. It takes care of them just so long as they're good little cogs, and don't go jumping around in the engine. And that's what you want to do. You want to yell murder. You, the chief witness we have against the mayor, want to give that mayor the chance to turn a murder charge back on you! And don't think he won't, Peter. He'll grab any straw, and you're offering him the whole box. You want me to press an investigation into a death that had much better be tagged an accident and lost in the files."

"Better for whom?" I asked quietly.

"For everybody, and especially for you!" Devlin shouted. Then he smiled apologetically.

"Look, kid, you're too smart to go pulling a boner like this. We know you got a phone call at the paper earlier last night, because we checked and found out you had. It went through the board; there's a record of it. Right after that you told the operator you weren't to be disturbed. And right after that you went out. If I were prosecuting, I'd say you were trying to establish an alibi. You drove twenty miles to the cottage at night, knowing all the time, and you admit this, that your wife had gone on a shopping trip to Frisco and wouldn't be back for a few days.

"Yet you went. You've been having trouble with her lately, mostly about other men, and the rows haven't been any too private. You had good reason to be sore at her. Everybody knows you had good reason."

"All right," I said roughly. "So it was a lousy match. So I married a girl who wanted to set up housekeeping in a punch bowl. So I'd been fighting with her off and on. So what?"

"So there's a murder motive for you, Peter," he said slowly. "At a time when

you can clinch our case against Morgan and his party, your wife dies and you have a motive for killing her. And don't think it can't be used."

His eyes, looking at me across the desk, were very hard and bright. "For all I know, you actually did kill her. Even me, Pete, I can think like that. Maybe I wouldn't blame you. I'm not God; I don't have to judge my friends. But there are plenty of other people who'd love the chance, and once it goes beyond this office it goes out of my hands, and I won't be able to do a thing for you. If you hadn't run into Morgan's son, of all people, you would have been back in the city and no one the wiser. I'm telling you how it looks, Peter, how it will be made to look for you. It's the oldest reason in the world, kid, and it fits you well enough if anyone wants to try it on."

"And you'd like to try it on?"

"Why, hell," he said gently. "You heard what the Bayliss girl said. She goes around with the mayor's son, when she can keep tabs on him. And the mayor would sell what's left of his soul to see you crucified, because if he can hammer in the nails, not only does he steal the best witness we have against him, but he can put on a drive for civic reform that beats anything we can show. And he's still in the driver's seat and will continue to be if you don't smarten up."

He sighed and looked at me. "I'm just telling you what a smarter man would know without having to be told, Peter. I'm just telling you that your job with the paper won't help you at all, because your paper is run by its advertising, and its advertising is run by the men who are interested in our little red wagon. They won't be going out on any limbs for you, boy, not with all those axes ready to chop down the tree. If this thing is hung around your neck, kid, we'll be able to get along without you somehow. Be smart, kid. As district attorney I can smother this thing, but only if you'll let me. This whole thing was an accident."

THE haze in the room seemed to have thickened. I said, very carefully, keeping my voice level with an effort, "Brady, you know I didn't do anything to her. You know that, Brady. And you know just as well that this wasn't any accident."

He cleared his throat and threw the pipe at the ashtray and missed, and reached for

a cigarette, never taking his eyes off my face. "As far as we're concerned, kid, you're either lily-white or as black as they come."

He slapped his hands sharply on the desk, so the broken piece of wall bracket jumped and fell off the desk into an empty waste basket with a metallic clang. He got up, and came over and stood directly before my chair, his hands hanging loosely at his sides. His face was even grayer. I thought that perhaps this was hurting him a little, down inside. He looked the way a man with a bad heart looks, without any hope that the sickness will leave him. He began speaking, in his soft, modulated tone, but there was a kind of restrained savagery behind it.

"When I put my finger on you six months ago, I thought I was picking a man who'd been around. You're no punk reporter; you're no sloppy cub scrabbling for handouts. I needed a man with a solid head and enough sense to move around without blowing his horn in every dark street. I needed a man who knew City Hall. So I picked you. A man close to the mayor, so much with him that you wouldn't be noticed. A quiet-looking guy you wouldn't pick out in a crowd. And don't tell me I had to twist your arm, Peter. You were married to a girl who liked to live the way no one lives on your salary. You think I didn't know that? You think I didn't know her? You were already up to your ears in debt. I offered you a soft touch, kid. You didn't even have to lose your self-respect to get it, and you know it damn well."

He ground out his cigarette and took another out of the pack and threw the wrapper on the floor and lighted the cigarette with a hand that shook slightly. The smoke drifted over my head. "Look, kid, I don't want this to happen to you. Mayor Morgan will hop on it like a vulture on a dead crow, and you'll be that crow. His papers will bounce up and down on your face. They'll tear your guts out; they'll press for a conviction until we have to throw you to the wolves. And your word won't be worth an election cigar to anyone. Every damn thing you've done will go against you. They'll nail you to the wall, and they'll use our hammer to do it with. Can't you get that through your head?"

He dropped the cigarette on the rug at my feet and walked around the chair and

stood looking out the window a moment.

"So help me God," he said, his voice muffled. "I won't see half a year's work in the ashen because you've got some noble notion about avenging a murder that could be nothing but a woman reaching for some soap and pulling a radio into the tub with her. I won't see it, Peter. I won't see my chances kicked in the belly because you've got to feel noble about a woman you should be glad to be rid of."

I watched the cigarette burning its way through the nap of the rug. I said, "It's nice of you to put it so gently, Brady. It's nice to know what kind of people I've been working with. It makes me feel real clean inside."

He made an irritated, futile motion with one arm, like a man shooing flies. "Just get away from me, Pete. Just leave me alone until I forget about that six months."

"Sure," I said stiffly. "Any special place you'd like me to be, so you won't have to strain your cops looking for me?"

He turned, lurching a little, his face flushed. His eyes were glazed, almost feverish. He just looked at me.

"All right," I said. I got up and walked to the door. I stood there thinking about where I would go and what I'd do when I got there, and the loneliness in me began to move around like a weak hand in the dark. I felt empty and tired and not a little dirty. I wanted to think about things, and the things I wanted to think about scared me a little.

"All right, Brady," I said quietly. "Let's all be crooks together, eh? Let's all be accomplices in covering up evidence of murder, so you can get ahead in life. It's a tough grind. I wouldn't want to stand in your way. If you want to find me, you know the road out to the cottage. That's where I'll be. All by myself, for perhaps a week, and then I'll be in another state, or in Mexico, or in any other rat-hole where the rats are a little cleaner."

He stood there, just looking at me. Finally his shoulders sagged and he let out a long breath. He was all worn out from acting like a father to me, from being the suave D.A. turned friend in the hour of need. I thought that perhaps I could hate his guts, once the hate overcame the holowness in my head. All I would need was a little time to think about it.

"The cottage?" he said, frowning.

"Where else?"

He shrugged. "If you've got the guts to stay there, it's as good a place as any. There's no phone now; no one can bother you very much." He scrubbed his jaw. "Look, Pete. Just another week, is all. Just another week, and we'll talk about this again, and if you feel the same way, all right. We'll take a look at it."

"You won't find anything," I told him, grinning a crooked grin. "After a week you won't even know where to look."

He ignored that, and came across the room, not seeing the cigarette on the rug, and slumped down wearily at his desk. He looked older and a little more beaten, and his mouth was not so firm. At another time and in another place I could have felt sorry for him.

He said, "Stay out there a week, if you can stand it. We'll have our briefs ready by then, and all it will mean will be a few days in court. It may not even come to that. I'll put a man near you to keep the flies off."

I opened the door and started to close it behind me and paused. He didn't look around. The cigarette had consumed half its length on the rug and was beginning to fill the room with the stench of burning wool. I went back and carefully put my foot on the trail of ash and ground it in. He didn't move. I went quietly out, shutting the door behind me, and took the elevator down to the main hall and walked across it, my heels making loud, imperative sounds on the scrubbed tile.

WHEN I stepped through the revolving door, I saw a nondescript man leaning against one of the grooved pillars. He was wearing an old hat, and he had the sad countenance of a Great Dane with ulcers. He looked at me as I went by and nodded his head, so that his face came up into the foggy rays from the lamps over the entrance.

I said, "Hello, Bert," and he smiled sadly and nodded again and said, "Hi, Pete," and went back to his job of holding up the Hall of Justice with his broad back.

He was a homicide man named Bert Henderson, and not given to holding up pillars at any time of day or night unless he had been told to. I glanced at the clock over the entrance. It was three o'clock of a Satur-

day morning, and I could feel a third strike in the air, a sensation that something about what had been said in Brady Devlin's office was off-color, and I couldn't be quite sure whether it was something I had said, or whether the girl or Devlin had put the faint edge of doubt in my mind.

I walked over to the lot where my car was parked and got under the wheel and was idling the engine when the door on the curb side opened and a woman leaned into the car, her face pale against the lighter collar of the tan polo coat. The scar at the corner of her eye stood out distinctly. We paused there, looking at each other. Over her shoulder I could see Henderson, blending in with his pillar. His eyes seemed to have grown a little.

I said, "You're not in very good company, Miss Bayliss. It's time you were home in bed."

She had her hands thrust into the pockets of the coat, and now she took her right hand out of her pocket, saying nothing. The gun on her gloved palm looked big enough to rate a caisson and a crew of Marines.

She said breathlessly, "It's yours, I guess, O'Mara. I do most of my hunting with bows and arrows."

I took the gun and sat there looking at it stupidly. I had forgotten about the gun; I had overlooked it entirely. I closed my hand around it tightly, feeling her small hand against mine.

She was shivering. She whispered, "I'm sorry, O'Mara. I guess you don't feel much like jokes tonight, but I thought you might want this back. It was lying under you in the road."

And then she was gone. Her car ground quickly into life and she jerked it backwards to clear my rear bumper, then went into first and away down the street with a racket of gears that said her mind wasn't on her driving.

My gun and I sat looking at each other. The gun was oily and black and gritty with sand. I wondered where Brady Devlin and his plans for greater glory would have been if the homicide men had found the gun first, if they had known for certain that the gun and the premeditation that combine to make first-degree murder had been keeping company with me that night. I wondered if Laura Bayliss would ever have a reason for telling them.

I was still thinking about that when I pulled away from the curb and drifted down the block past Bert Henderson, who obviously had no interest in reporters who drive 1948 Dodge coupes. I thought he was smiling a wet, untidy smile, as if he had just won a bet with himself. He waved at my rear window, a limp wave without much meaning in it. His hand was still half-raised when I hit the corner and turned out of his sight.

CHAPTER THREE

Losers, Weepers

I CAME out of the surf that morning and shook some of the water off my back and stood in the warm benevolent sun, looking toward the beach cottage. By day it had all the horror of memory, but none in fact. I went up the beach languidly, and lay down on my stomach in the hot sand and rested my head on my arm. There was a dull, grinding thump going on inside my skull, and the place where the police surgeon's fine two-o'clock hand had woven its pattern of stitches throbbed with a lighter agony, like an off-key symphony.

I had driven out through the last swirling fingers of fog to a gray ocean that dawn, chewing on the taste in my mouth and gritting my teeth to keep my stomach in place. When I got there, I had wanted a steady-ing drink the way a man wants both his eyes. Instead I had rolled up the windows of the car and gone fitfully to sleep on the front seat with my knees wedged against the gear shift and my head on one arm-rest.

In the later day I had gone up to the cottage and opened all the windows, but I hadn't gone into the bathroom, although they had taken her away a long time before. I didn't want to look at it. I wanted nothing to do with the wet tile floor and its scattering of burnt-out flashbulbs and the pile of her lingerie on the wicker wash-basket and the dead, dead smells of the place. I had limped around the house, keeping my mind on the throbbing in my head and the taste in my mouth. I hadn't gone near the bedroom or the kitchen, either, and now I was hungry with a hunger that made my belly muscles twitch.

I lay on the sand for perhaps an hour, thinking, and the thoughts made a jumbled

pattern in my head. Of only one thing was I reasonably certain: someone, with malice aforethought and a fine hand, had murdered my wife. All the talking in the world wouldn't change that, nor all the fine speeches by ambitious politicians bent on keeping me warm and snug in the party fold. It wasn't anything I could explain, but in some involved way I simply knew. And the knowing did nothing to ease the racket in my head.

It was noon before I moved. Then I got dressed slowly and set out down the beach, cutting across the finger of headland, the lank sea-grass whipping at my knees. By one o'clock I could see the cottage where Laura Bayliss had lived with her father before he had been bowled over by a hit-and-run car. I stood for a moment looking at the cottage. Chintz curtains blew gaily in the windows and there was a thin faint racket of radio from the place. I thought maybe if I got a little closer I would smell lunch cooking, and the thought moved my feet.

I came up to the cottage from the rear, the sound of the muted radio growing louder, and tapped gently on the back door. When there was no answer, I walked around to the front and tried again. Nothing happened. The radio played on, as radios will, through a commercial, and began working on the problems of a housewife whose son had run off with a chorus girl. I didn't think that a girl of Laura Bayliss' type would be interested enough to listen. There was no smell of food, no smell of anything but the sea and the sand, and I was beginning to weary of that. I opened the door and stepped into a hall gay with bright splashes of colored throw rugs; there was an elusive fragrance of perfume in the place.

At the end of the hallway I paused again, calling out, and got no answer. The housewife on the radio began to cry softly in a practiced way, as if she had been crying all her life. The radio sat on a small end table beside a leather settee that had an afghan thrown carelessly over it; the walls were touched here and there with small, framed pictures of people and places. One of the people was a lean, hard-looking man with the sun in his eyes and a vaguely embarrassed look on his face, his right arm outstretched with a fish dangling from it. His

hair looked white in the snap, but would probably have been gray.

I sat down on the settee and lighted a cigarette and listened to the housewife. After awhile I got up and turned her off, understanding why the son had left home. I began wandering around the room, picking things up and putting them down, until I came to a desk in the corner. A large manilla envelope lay there, thumb-marked and crinkled as if it had been carried around a good deal, as if the contents had been scanned a lot. I opened the flap and peered inside. Large, glossy prints, also crinkled and bent.

They were not the type of pictures a young woman would keep around the house unless she had a strong reason or a taste for the macabre. They showed a man lying face down with his head wedged into a gutter, a man who might once have held a fish in one hand and grinned foolishly at a camera. He lay with that peculiar disregard for posture that the dead usually have, and there were tire marks on his light trench-coat and oily splotches on the material that might have been motor-oil or blood, and under him wet pavement. You could see feet in the picture, as if people were standing about, and one side of a black van that would be the morgue wagon. Near the dead man's head lay a gleaming object that looked as if it might be a foglight from the car that killed him.

I PUT the photos back in their envelope, feeling a little cold; it seemed somehow inhuman that anyone would want them around, after all this time.

As I laid the envelope where I had found it, the front door opened and I turned to find Laura Bayliss staring at me, her face a dead, chalky white under the tan. She was wearing the same tan polo coat, open now, and under that a plain white dress. She came down the hall, carrying a paper sack, and put the sack down on the settee without saying anything. She took off the coat.

"I just dropped over to see if I could scrounge some lunch," I said lamely. I could feel hot color in my face, and that made me vaguely mad, as if I had spilled tea down a dowager's neck. "You know how it is."

"No," she said, quietly and without taking her eyes from me. "Just how is it?"

"Look," I said, "I didn't come over here to snoop, if that's what you mean."

"Didn't you?" Her voice was turning cold and there were twin highspots of red over her high cheekbones. "When I came in you were going through that desk, but you weren't snooping. I'm interested, O'Mara. If you weren't snooping, just what were you doing?"

I sighed and sat down and waved cigarette smoke away from my face. I said, "All right, so I had no business going through your personal matters, if you can call a set of police photos personal. And you can believe it or not, but I did come over here for that lunch, and to find out just why you covered up for me last night. It bothered me. People don't go around doing things like that for anyone, and especially not for men they've never seen before. Not girls who have family connections with the police."

She laughed, a short, bitter sound. "Why complicate something simple, O'Mara? You were a man who had just lost a wife. I thought that might hurt, the way it hurts to lose a father, without any rhyme or sense to it. I didn't think the gun mattered. I've seen a lot of guns in my life."

"There's a difference," I said softly. "There's a difference in my wife's death, though no one else wants to see it. In my circles they call it deliberate murder."

"I heard you last night. I thought you were a little crazy from being hit. You sounded a little crazy then; you don't sound very much saner now."

"Not that crazy. And not crazy enough to fit you into any family group that has Eric Morgan in the same frame. You go to parties with him, and you drive him back into town because he's too lushed up to handle a car himself, and him with some stray bottle-bender he's picked up along the way. That's being too broadminded, Miss Bayliss. Even a first class girl-guide would draw the line there."

She flushed suddenly and turned away, catching up the paper sack and going out into the kitchen. I followed and leaned against the sink and felt for another cigarette.

I said, "Let's pick up the pieces. We've got similar problems, in a way. Let's add them up. You're going around with a spoiled brat who fits you the way a rac-

coon coat fits a rabbit, smiling when he passes out in your lap, carrying him home to bed and tucking him in, letting him two-time you at every chance, and he'd make plenty of chances. Leading the gay life. You, the movie and soda and home at eleven type. And all the while you keep police pictures of the accident that killed your father three months ago. No dice. You think I don't know your type of girl?"

"All right," she said suddenly, her voice keying up. "So you know my type. Does that mean I don't like a little fun, just like anyone else?"

"Young Eric is everybody's grief and nobody's fun, kitten," I said.

I walked over to her and put my hands on her shoulders, feeling the trembling of her body. She leaned away from me as far as the edge of the kitchen table would permit, still shaking.

"Look," I whispered, my mouth just touching her hair, "if Eric was at the wheel of that hit-and-run car, you'll never get to first base. Never in a thousand years, and you haven't got that much time for mourning. You can fit him into it—drunk and reckless and not giving a damn, and running a man down on a dark, wet street and not stopping. That would be his kind of crime. But you'll never prove it if you haven't proved it now."

Her head came back, banging against my teeth; she swung around, catching at my arms. Her eyes were tightly shut, the tears moving slowly and quietly down her face, her body jerking a little. I put one arm around her to steady her, feeling sorry for her, and Eric Morgan picked that moment to open the back door. He sauntered in, a towel draped around his thick young neck and a hot, eager look on his face. He got inside the door before he saw us by the table, and stopped there, swinging a little with the force of his own motion.

LAURA BAYLISS jerked away from me, her face flaming. The boy grinned a small nasty grin and slowly took the towel from around his neck and dropped it on the floor. The bags under his eyes rated express tags, but he seemed bigger now than he had the night before, and there were muscles under his striped jersey that moved when he moved. He came cat-footing toward the table, still smirking, but there was

a red, hot look in his eyes that seemed to be no laughing matter. His mouth moved to form a word that had grown up a lot since it left the last washroom wall.

I looked at him, and a small, tight feeling in my stomach suddenly expanded and I began to feel very good. I said softly, "Now that Lohengrin has arrived, you'd better go out and water his horse." Laura made a muffled sound but didn't move.

Ignoring her, the boy stared at me. He chuckled, a small, dirty sound. "I remember you," he said, as if he were coining a phrase. "You're the bottle baby." The chuckle moved muscles in his throat. He was standing easily now, one hand resting on the edge of the table, and the ease of it should have warned me.

He moved as a fish moves, seemingly without visible effort, scooping up a bottle of vinegar that stood on the table and smashing it on the edge of the table. In the same flowing motion he came up the jagged edges of the bottle. The reek of vinegar was sudden and nauseating in the small, warm room. I could see his face behind the bottle. It was an animal face, not quite sane, not very pretty now. I shoved Laura back and muttered for her to get out of the room. Eric still stood there, holding the bottle.

He lunged suddenly, raking the bottle toward my face, and I ducked and went down on my back, kicking out with one foot and landing my heel on his kneecap. He screamed sharply, and his lunge buckled under the kick. He fell atop me, the bottle jamming into the wooden floor beside my head. As he fell I got one knee up in time to meet him. He took it in the stomach and flopped over, his mouth agape and his face at once purple, his hand tugging at the bottle, his splayed fingers scrabbling for my eyes. I grunted and took his free wrist in my teeth and bit down hard, rolling with his motion, and caught him with the edge of my other hand across the nape of the neck.

He stiffened then, the awareness going out of his eyes, and fell back. I got up, breathing hard, and went unsteadily toward the kitchen sink and rinsed my mouth out. Then I walked back and made certain that he hadn't swallowed his tongue. When I straightened up, Laura Bayliss was standing in the doorway with a police service

revolver held rather shakily in one hand.

"A kindly thought," I said weakly. I got the boy's arms over my shoulders and heaved him upright. He drooled unhappily in my ear, his breathing like tires on a gravel road.

We went down the path that led toward the jetty and the small cat-boat moored there. His knees banged against the back of my legs, so that we lurched and stumbled like a couple of drunks doing a fandango, first one way and then the other. He was vaguely conscious when I dumped him over the thwart of the boat and cast off from the small jetty, conscious enough to mumble his nasty little word, but not conscious enough to know why he was mumbling it. He would have that kind of reflex action, and of a sudden I felt sorry for his father.

I gave the boat a kick with my foot and it rocked out, drifting slowly away from the jetty. I stood there, watching the boat coast out, and I felt dirty and in need of a shave and a bath and a good rinsing out generally.

I no longer felt hungry enough to go back to the girl's place and make polite small-talk around the one thing that stood out most in my mind. I turned and looked at the cottage; the chintz curtains still swung lazily at the windows. I thought if I went back up the path I could scrounge the lunch I no longer wanted. I thought about it for a moment, and about the lonely girl who saved police photos of a father three months dead.

Then I began walking along the rim of the beach, back the way I had come.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Dark Face of Murder

I HAD company for supper, what there was of it. I woke up from an afternoon nap and lay for a long time in the early dusk, staring up at the ceiling and wondering why I felt as if I had been spitting on someone's grave, and recalling the morning with no particular joy. I had been lying there for awhile when Bert Henderson came over the crest of the dune, wading along dispiritedly and still wrapped up in his faded trench-coat, as if he thought that exposure to the setting sun might be harmful. He walked the way a man walks when

he feels that he has some grudge against his feet. He had a paper bag under one arm.

He came in without knocking and put the bag down on the table and stood by it staring at me with his sad, wistful eyes. He shook his head dismally. "It must be wonderful to have pull," he said unhappily. "It must be just wonderful to sit out here in the sun and wait for some poor dumb cop to bring you your groceries. How do you do it?"

I just looked at him and said nothing.

He shrugged and sat down without taking off his coat and continued to paw me with his brown, doggy eyes. "Maybe it's tougher than I think. I understand you been throwing your weight around on the poor unfortunate rich, kid. I understand you knocked the poor fella cold. Haven't you got enough trouble?"

I looked at him coldly. "Go on," I said, "get it off your belly. There must be an awful lot of it to cover that much area."

"You see?" he said unhappily. "Not a kind word for anyone. Some people might figure it was because of—that," and he jerked his head toward the bathroom door. "But I doubt it." He found a cigar and clamped his big, horny white teeth into it and went on, in a muffled voice, "A little advice for you, baby. Don't go fussing around with the Bayliss kid. We got sort of a soft spot in our hearts for her downtown. We wouldn't want her to suffer any embarrassment."

"You wouldn't want to do anything about finding out who drove the car that killed her father either," I said nastily. "That would look too much like work."

Henderson sighed. "Aw hell. Maybe I'm just sore because I'm a homicide cop and don't make as much money a week as you." He had a dead voice that seemed somehow to perspire a little when he used it. He didn't appear to be very interested in what the voice was saying. "A thing like that bothers a man after awhile, I guess." He looked at me plaintively.

"We found a fog lamp beside Bayliss," Henderson said drearily. "A Lucas, English make. We found out the Morgan kid drives one of those fancy English sport cars, also with Lucas lights, but we didn't get very far with it. Seems there are a lot of other English sport cars around, here and there. Seems we didn't have any right to go any

farther with it." He smiled at me, without any emotion I could see, and reached over for a banana and sat waving the fruit in the air, as if to cool it off. He took the unlighted cigar and put it back in his breast pocket.

"To get back to the matter at hand," he continued, with his mouth full, "and to why a guy like me might get sore at a guy like you. Maybe it's because I get a funny feeling when I come into a man's house, running errands for him because the D.A. tells me I should keep an eye on him, and all the time I'm thinking, 'Now here's a guy who's got it soft. He's got cops carrying his eats for him, so he won't have to go out in the public eye; and all the time he's sitting in the same house where his wife was murdered, and he doesn't seem to mind.' " He dropped the banana skin on the table and swung his bulk around and peered at me in the half-light.

I GOT up and probed around in the bag, not yet quite awake, and found a banana and peeled it and stood by the table eating it and not enjoying it very much. The liquor I had drunk when I had come back from the Bayliss girl's place burned like an old oil-lamp in my stomach.

Henderson looked at the half-frozen grimace on my face and sighed. "I guess that could be it. I guess it isn't nice for a guy to sleep in the same house after his wife has gone like that, and to know that her going wasn't any accident, like everyone makes out, and to be doing nothing about it. I wouldn't like that myself. I guess perhaps you don't go for it either."

"You guess too much."

"Not as much as you think." He stood up, grunting, and walked over and looked out the window toward the sea. "Nice view here. Nice beach. A man could come up that beach at night and nobody would even know he was around, the noise that water makes. On a foggy night, you could do it easy. Maybe even easier, if you were expected. Man could say it was a shame for a girl to be stuck out here away from all the bright lights, with no one to look at her, no one to give her a loving word. If I were going to do what was done here, that's the way I'd do it. And I'd pick the night after she was supposed to have gone to Frisco, so's no one would think it odd if she didn't

show up at all the usual places; maybe I'd even suggest we go to Frisco together, just to make it easier. If I were doing it, I'd make it an easy kill, the kind of a thing that could happen to any girl in any bathtub. No violence, kid, no marks. Who called you at the paper, kid? Who tipped you off?"

"I don't know," I said. I felt numb and a little chilled.

"Sure you don't," Henderson said soothingly. "I don't get that call either. Who wants a witness to murder? Somebody trying to frame you, Pete? Somebody trying to fit you in?" He shook his head. "Too clumsy, to call you and not call us. The long arm of coincidence? I don't buy that stuff by the yard in my business."

He swung around and there was no humor in his face, and the dogginess was gone from his eyes. He reached over and flicked the switch of a table lamp, and when nothing happened, mumbled and muttered and fumbled through his bulging pockets again and plucked out a house-fuse and began walking around looking for the switch-box.

"In the kitchen," I said.

He smiled and tossed me the fuse and said sleepily, "You go put it in, Pete. My feet hurt."

When I came back he was standing by the bathroom door, his bulk filling it. I said derisively, "You must have your life insurance paid up, Henderson. I couldn't miss you with my eyes shut."

He grunted and said nothing, and went on staring at the bath tub as if the sight of it fascinated him completely. His shoes squished in the water that remained after most of it had trickled down the floor drain. The radio was gone, the woman who had been my wife was gone, but the dead smell of the place lingered, like the reek of flowers in a funeral home. The smell of it clogged my throat.

Henderson's face was a complete and wooden blank; he stared at the wall and made a pushing motion with his hands and picked up one of the bracket screws and peered at that, turning it over in his thick fingers, and sighed again. Then he lumbered past me and stood in the middle of the living room like a tent without a ridge-pole.

"What'd you do with the gun the girl gave you last night?" he asked abruptly,

not bothering to turn his head. When I didn't answer, he peered over his shoulder at me, his eyes vaguely disturbed. "Don't get fussy with me, Peter. What'd you do with the gun?"

I pointed to a table drawer. He retrieved the gun and stood turning it over in his hands. Then he put it down on the table and picked up his cigar and slumped down heavily in his chair.

"That looks effective," I said, sneering a little. "You ought to go to Hollywood, Henderson. You'd make a fine movie cop. They'd have you lurking in dark, foggy alleys in no time. I like the cigar routine, too."

He took a long breath. "Why don't you relax, Pete? With you it's always the smart crack. Look, kid, I've been a cop for fifteen years, ten of it on homicide, and after all that time a punk politician comes along and tells me to lay off. He tells me it's all an accident and his department will handle it. He tells me to go home and play Canasta with my wife and just forget about everything. As if it never happened. What am I supposed to think about a thing like that?"

"Maybe you're not supposed to think at all. Ever look at it that way?"

"I've looked at it that way. I've looked at it another way. Somewhere in my district is a man or a woman who has committed murder, for no reason I can think of. Maybe you. Last night I thought it was you, because it all pointed that way. But then I see Laura Bayliss giving you something that looks very much like a gun, and when I check on it, I find there's a gun registered in your name, and I began to think, maybe not you, maybe not Peter O'Mara at all, but someone who is going to profit in one way or another from the death of Peter O'Mara's wife. I'm still working on that."

H HE SHOT me a strange look and sighed. "Look, kid, this is no stray kill. All this happened because it was supposed to happen, and because someone wanted it to happen. Don't you get the pattern? It's been almost a year since you got married, Pete, and in all that time nobody makes any trouble for either of you; yet the same situation existed between you both six months or eight months ago that prevailed

up to last night. All the trouble you had you made together.

"But nobody killed her just for the killing. There's no homicidal maniac wandering around in the bull-rushes with a bloody axe under his arm. No passion at all. Just plenty of thinking and plenty of time to think about it. That's why I can't place you in it, no matter how hard I try, and I've tried hard enough because in some ways you looked very good in the part. I was trying hard last night when I saw the girl give you that gun. There was only one place you could have lost it, only one time she could have picked it up, and that was when she met you for the first time just after you found your wife's body.

"Sure, you came out here last night with one idea in your head and a gun in your hand. That would fit you. The phone call to bring you out, eager to kill, eager to hurt someone who'd managed to hurt you where you live. But not you sitting out here with a bunch of stews, planning to make a radio fall into a bathtub while your wife was in it. Not you loosening the screws so she couldn't help pulling it off."

His cigar had gone out. He began patting his pockets wearily, blinking his sad brown eyes, and got up and stumped over to the fireplace and took a match from the mantel and scraped it on his heel. After he had dropped the spent stick he bent over laboriously, groaning, and straightened up with some shards of dark green plastic in his hand and stood looking at them, and then at me.

He brought the shattered swizzle-stick back and tossed the pieces on the table with the two long screws he had found in the bathroom, sat down, and peered at them with his eyes half-shuttered, as if all he wanted in the world was two hours sleep. The cigar made rancid halos in the dusky room.

"You aren't thinking, Pete," he said softly. "You a household guy, you aren't using your eyes or your head, kid. Didn't you ever pull a screw out of a plaster wall, Pete?"

I had it then. I rubbed my finger along the threads and a little plaster adhered to my damp skin.

"Nobody pulled them out," I said slowly. "They were unscrewed first. There isn't enough plaster between the threads...."

He gazed at me somberly and got to his feet. "Sure," he said, "that's it. That's why I came out here today. That's what I was looking for—just enough to tell me that I'm right and Delvin is wrong, or is trying to be wrong." He smiled a mournful smile. "And this junk?" he asked, pointing to the pieces of green plastic.

"Don't you ever drink?"

"Just beer, on my salary."

"What's left of a swizzle stick," I told him wearily. "Something my wife had made up specially. I broke it when I came in last night. It was lying on the floor."

He grunted and dismissed that from his mind and slouched across the room, pausing by the door and peering back at me in a vaguely sinister fashion.

"It gets dark all of a sudden out here," he said queerly, his eyes on the window. "Maybe a little later on I'll come back and tuck you in for the night, kid."

He opened the door, having trouble with the warp, and stood limned against the light from the room, peering out toward the ocean, his head cocked to one side. Then he grunted and closed the door behind him and I heard the scuffle of his feet in the sand, going away, and then the silence closed in like a damp sheet.

I blew out my breath and walked back to the table and stood looking at the paper bag of groceries and the gun beside it, and the two screws that hadn't been pulled from any plaster wall but had been carefully unscrewed, with premeditation. I stared down at them and at the plastic chips and the mermaid whose bright eyes returned my stare unblinkingly. And looking at them, I knew I'd had about enough of this. I turned and started across the room toward the telephone table, intending to call Brady Devlin, and was half-way there when I remembered I had had the phone taken out the week before, thinking I could get some peace that way.

I examined the empty table with care, and sat down stiffly on the settee in front of the fireplace, letting my mind give its feet a preliminary shuffle. I began thinking about what Henderson had said, and what Henderson had said intimated an ugly fact. I looked at the two glasses and the mess on the cocktail table, at the glasses with their thin layer of Scotch that seemed to move smokily in the light, and it was as if I could

see two people sitting here talking earnestly, and it was almost as if I could hear the talk and the theme of the talk.

It would have been about money or position, or both. There would be only one way in which my late wife could have driven money out of any of the people she knew; the word roiled hot and slimy in my mind. She had known something that she shouldn't have known; and the knowing had been a tool to her, and the tool had turned in her hand and killed her. She had been blackmailing someone.

I started to laugh and caught myself snickering like an idiot and stopped on a high note, because there was nothing to laugh at. She had been playing checkers with murder, and she had lost the last move, and whatever she had known had gone silently down the drain with the water in which she had died. I took a long breath that hurt my chest and ran one hand up and down my jaw and was surprised to find that I had a stubble that scraped my palm.

I held the hand away from my face and examined it closely; I splayed the fingers, and as they twitched open the door moved with a small convulsive jerk and began opening, not at all quickly. I sat there by the table watching the door opening as if I had been waiting there all day for it to open and reveal a friend.

But the man who stepped into the room was no friend.

CHAPTER FIVE

Primed to Kill

HE MOVED with a thought-out precision, his mouth twitching a little with the concentration he was giving it. He had a gun in his hand, a .22 target pistol that jerked to the right and then to the left as he moved. He swayed a little, licking at his lips, and raised the gun very carefully and pulled the trigger. The .22 went off with a report that was like a signal gun in the room, and a vase on the mantel shelf broke quietly and tinkled on the hearth.

He laughed then, a nice, healthy boyish laugh. His hair hung dankly over his sweaty forehead. A wisp of smoke trickled up from the muzzle of the gun. He said his nasty

word and slobbered a little over his full lower lip. There was a bruise over his cheekbone that I had given him on Laura Bayliss' kitchen floor that morning. I could see the memory of it burning into him, and I thought perhaps that bruise would kill me.

"Get up, you. . . ." he said silkily. His voice was just a whisper on the night air.

I got up, slowly, trying to keep my eyes off the black muzzle of the gun, trying to show him I wasn't afraid of him. I was scared silly of him.

I said harshly, "How'd you come in tonight, kid? Up from the sea, the way you did last night? What'd my wife do to you, kid? Laugh at you and tell you to scamper home to your old man? That why you killed her, junior?"

He said his word again, more strongly this time, as if he had finally got the robust swing of it after all those years of practicing, and leered at me. He was drunk or doped or both, and he could never have driven a car this far, but he had the kind of a mind that would clear a little with the popping of a sail above him and the firm thrust of a tiller under his hand. Up from the sea, and again to kill.

"Let me tell you," I whispered. "Let me tell you how it happened. You came and you killed and you went away and got drunk, and in the liquor you came back to see if it was all right, to see if I had paid any attention to your phone call, to see if she was really dead. You had to have your final look at her, there in the tub where you killed her. You had to know she was dead, that her mouth was dead, just as dead as the man who went down under your wheels that other night three months ago—the man you didn't stop to help, and who might have lived if you had stopped. She knew about it and she was going to tell on you if you didn't pay, and you had to kill her to stop that."

I took another step toward him and he shot again. One of the glasses on the table fell apart with the same quiet efficiency and the same economy of sound. The ejected cartridge case bounced off the wall and fell by the edge of the rug. I paused, sweating coldly, my mouth open a little.

"You're all mixed up," I said hoarsely. "You're walking around in a man's body, but you're still eight years old. You can't

have all your own way, so you're going to hurt somebody until you get it. You're scared silly and you don't know why. Did she tell you that, Eric? Did she laugh in your face and push you away and tell you that, kid?"

He put his back against the door, his face pale and flat and quite without expression. Only the hatred in his eyes remained, diluted now with uncertainty, as if he didn't really know what I was talking about, as if all this was just so much sound that washed around in his head and stalled off the time when he could get back at me for what had happened earlier that day. He was that kind of a boy; walk on his lawn and he'd throw a brick, and if the brick missed, run to his old man for an axe. He held the gun up in front of his face and thrust the muzzle at me.

I laughed and started across the room toward him, getting ready to jump out of his way and wondering all the time what it feels like to get shot in the face, even with a .22.

I never found out. The glass in the windows shattered, and sound and flame followed it in one continuous roar. The boy dropped his little gun on the rug and stood up on his toes, his face a shocked, blurred oval of horror. He swayed there, trying to move his feet, then fell forward. He fell against the table, spilling the sack of groceries, and scrambled at the edge of the table, trying to say something and losing the words in a welter of blood. The gun in the window went off again and he slid limply to one side and became very still on the floor.

Brady Devlin chopped methodically at the remaining glass in the frame with the barrel of his gun and looked into the room, his face twisted. His eyes jumped from the body of the boy to me and he seemed to shiver slightly. Then he shoved the window frame up and climbed into the room, brushing at his neat gray business suit, still holding the gun in his right hand.

HE PAUSED just inside the window. There was a sort of horror in his eyes, a sort of terrible fascination. He knelt down by the boy and rolled him over, lifted one eyelid, stood up.

"I almost waited too long," he said shakily. "For a second I thought I wouldn't quite make it."

"You made it," I said. I sat down listlessly on the settee and began rubbing my aching leg muscles. "Just like the Marines in a movie." I thought that was funny. I started to laugh, and the laugh turned sour and my stomach heaved.

I bent over the kid and looked at him for a long time. He had been dying before the second bullet caught him at the table. He was as dead now as he would ever be, and the things he had been trying to say were just as dead. I thought he might have been trying to get his favorite word out, just to prove he could still remember it.

"How much of it did you get?" I asked Devlin.

"Most of it. The part about the Bayliss killing, for one." He put the gun away distastefully and stood rubbing his hands on his trouser leg, not looking directly at me. "Nobody told me anything about that," he said bitterly. "That damned homicide department never tells you anything."

"You know now," I said. "It should make nice reading in the morning editions. It should go over big with the voters at the next election. That's what you want, isn't it? That's what you want more than anything else in this world."

He winced and sighed. "I guess that's what I want. I'm sorry it had to happen this way. We could have got along without this."

"Sure we could," I said softly. "But this way it's better. This way the boy can't deny anything. He can't talk back."

He glanced at me sharply, and then down. He said, "We'd better go shovel Henderson into the car and take him into town. The kid nearly knocked his head off with a billet of driftwood. I stumbled over him coming in."

I leaned one arm on the table. I said, "You could have phoned me, Brady. You didn't have to come all the way out. I wasn't going anywhere."

"Just as well I did," he grunted, looking down at the boy. "You haven't got a phone, anyway."

"I know," I said, very gently. "I know all about that. I live here. Remember? I live here and I had the phone taken out a few days ago, just before my wife was due to leave for Frisco, because we weren't going to stay out here when she came back. I thought maybe I could change things if

we lived in town. You'll pardon me for laughing. There isn't any town in this country that would change my wife. She wanted money and she wanted prestige and she wanted social position, and those are a few of the things I didn't happen to have."

I put a cigarette in my mouth and let it dangle. I said, around the cigarette, "Tell me one thing, Brady. Tell me the one thing that's been bothering me ever since I left your office. How come you knew there wasn't any phone out here, Brady?"

Devlin looked at me for a long time. Then he smiled, just a twitch of his thin, narrow mouth, and half turned toward me.

"Well," he said quietly, "in a way I'm glad you know. You can't understand how much of a strain it's been, Pete."

"I can try," I said. I was shaking all over, so that the table shook too. "I can try to imagine what it must be like to play around with another man's wife, and to have her turn the card on you and name her price. What was that price, Brady? That you marry her and carry her on to fame and fortune as the great Mrs. District Attorney, bound for the governor's mansion? Was that it?"

"More or less," he admitted calmly. "Listen, boy, I knew Nancy a long time before you ever heard her name. It had always been like that between us, all the time. She was a hell of a woman. Then she met you, and that was that, for the while, and then we found out that nothing ever really changes. You know what I mean, kid?"

"I know what you mean," I said. "Maybe I can even understand it. Fun to play with, but not so good to be tied to. She'd ruin you in a year."

He chuckled. His right hand had moved an inch or so. I thought it would keep right on moving, unless I did something to stop it. I wondered what I would do, when the time came.

"You see, Brady," I went on conversationally, "I've had a lot of time to think, and the one thing I kept thinking about was the neat, methodical way of it all. No heat or passion. No insane rage. And that ruled little Eric out. That and the fact that my wife would have been smart enough to have gone to Mayor Morgan himself, and not to the kid, if she had known about the

(Continued on page 110)

FELONY FOLLIES

by Jakobsson and Waggener

At first glance, a student of ancient Irish criminal procedure must be struck by the nicety of these so-called barbarians, back in the dawn-days of Western civilization. So attentive were they to deportment that they fixed damages to be paid by any rowdy person who shouted at a pig, thus causing it to run into somebody and upset him. The legal tome, called the "Book of Aicill," analyzed the matter for five pages.

It is only later that you realize one rather large misdemeanor has been left from the book's consideration. In fact, it seems not to have been considered a crime at all. It was murder!



Athanasios Manos, of Greece, had been taught to believe that a pledge was a sacred thing. He made a pledge at the age of seven. He spent the best part of a lifetime—thirty-eight years—in fulfilling his word. When Manos was a little boy, he was beaten up by an older youth, one Louis Darlanzi, who subsequently went to the United States. Little Manos swore to find Louis some day and kill him in revenge. As soon as he was old enough, he went to America too, in pursuit. To support himself in the search, he took many jobs, acquired a surprising amount of money. He married, prospered, entered his forties. And then he met Louis again, now a man nearing sixty, and killed him.

In a trice, Manos' comfort, success and happiness were swept away, as he was taken to jail, a confessed killer. But he had accomplished his pledge.

Frank Dewey, Canadian, sixty years old, heard the Mounties were after him again. He didn't think he'd done anything—this time. But he hit the road. In his adult life, he had received nineteen convictions on one charge or another, and probably felt generally guilty. Broke and hungry, he kept on the move. But the Mounties found him at last.

What they wanted to tell Dewey was that a British company was willing to buy from him, for a substantial sum, the pick-proof lock which he had invented in a prison machine-shop during one of his sentences. For the first time in his life, Dewey was glad the Mounties get their men.



Flowers grow on Devils' Island now. After the last war, when France abolished the world-infamous penal colony, emigrants were encouraged to go there in family groups, make homes.

One man, in particular, was active in the movement to make into a paradise what once had been the devil's. His name was Raymond Vaude. Those who didn't know him wondered at his zeal. Those who did were amazed that he wished to go to the island at all. For Vaude had been there before. As a convict. He had served seven hellish years of a sentence later proved to be based on mistaken evidence, before escaping in one of the island's rare jailbreaks.

He was not the first or last to escape. But he was the first who ever went back, after escape, to make flowers grow.

THE LADY TAKES A POWDER

*He knew his beautiful Anne was no murderess.
But why had she run away?*

THE police were watching his place now. As soon as he rounded the corner he saw the patrol car creep past his door before it disappeared into the night. Ahead of him, two women loitered to stare openly at the car, oblivious to the downpour of rain.

"Must be keeping tabs on that doctor—the one who's engaged to marry the nurse they're hunting for."

Dr. William Archer quickened his step, and edged past, but the voices followed him.

"You saw her picture in the paper? A pretty little thing. Can't tell me *he* isn't mixed up in it. She didn't look like she'd kill a fly."

"Maybe not, but it's still murder. The poor old lady."

He turned in at the worn brownstone that served as his office and living quarters. With the door closed behind him, he leaned back, his jaw rigid. He was in his early thirties, a compact man with deep, expressive eyes that were shadowed with worry and sleeplessness.

Uncertainty had lent a nightmare's distortion to the last two days. Mrs. Lustin's death he had accepted as inevitable. Elderly and invalided with diabetes, she had had only a feeble hold on life for a long time. But what followed he could scarcely believe, let alone accept.

Even the emotionless formality of the inquest had seemed unreal. Mrs. Lustin's lawyer had preceded him on the stand, dryly explaining the terms of her will, and for the first time Archer saw a terrifying significance to what had before seemed only a generous act.

"The bulk of the estate to Mrs. Lustin's nephew, Mr. Kirk Tolman." The lawyer flipped a page of the will and cleared his throat. "Certain charitable bequests and, additionally, the sum of five thousand to

her nurse, Anne Bronson, for—" an undertone of irony crept into the dry voice—"for attentiveness beyond the call of her profession."

Motive? It lay there in the stilted language, more than enough to convict Anne in the minds of people like the two women Archer had just passed on the street. And the means? He, himself, had described them at the inquest.

"Considering the patient's condition, a withdrawal of insulin would be fatal in a very short time." He spoke automatically, tensed for the question he feared would follow.

"Dr. Archer, is it not true that Anne Bronson asked you on the night Mrs. Lustin died whether a post-mortem examination would disclose if a normal saline solution had been injected instead of insulin?"

Archer's glance circled the room, found Kirk Tolman and fixed there. The blond man was expressionless, but only he had overheard Anne's question.

"Yes." The young doctor's reply was toneless.

"And you said?"

"It could not be determined by a post mortem, and to substitute that solution would be . . . murdering Mrs. Lustin."

"I see. And considering Miss Bronson's past *attentiveness*—" the examiner's voice was silky—"Mrs. Lustin would expect her injections at the proper time. *Something* had to be given her. Thank you, doctor."

"But—!"

The protest burst from Archer before he realized its futility. He couldn't shout down the record. Everything was there; the police investigation had opened his and Anne's lives like an anatomical study. It was an ordinary story, that of two young people in love, wanting to be married, but

By R. M. F.
JOSES



It hardly seemed possible that his career, his freedom, and even Anne's life could be risked as simply as this.



with financial hurdles blocking the way. The loan still to be repaid for Archer's schooling, the debts incurred to open an office. But nothing that five thousand dollars wouldn't solve, the examiner had smoothly implied. And crowning it all was Anne's disappearance on the night of Mrs. Lustin's death. . . .

Archer wrenched away from the door as if he were trying to shake free of his thoughts. The light was on in the waiting

room and he moved toward it. He stopped short when he recognized his caller.

"Kirk!"

Kirk Tolman was around Archer's age, a handsome blond man with a self-indulgent mouth. "Just about given you up, boy."

The two men faced each other in a strained silence. Archer was the first to break it. "I didn't expect to see you around here again, Kirk."

Tolman's hand grasped the young doctor's shoulder. "Look, Bill. This mess doesn't change things between us. We've been friends too long for that."

Friends, yes, Archer thought, but had they been close enough for Tolman to seek him out just to reaffirm it? Kirk seemed to sense the unspoken question.

"Call it the Auld Lang Syne spirit, Bill," he said with a grin. "It's New Year's Eve, you know." He hesitated, his expression sobering. "Why did she run out, Bill? I can't understand it. There would never have been the slightest doubt about Aunt Cora's death, and—" He broke off with a laugh. "That doesn't sound the way I mean it. I'm trying to say I can't picture Anne Bronson playing the heavy."

"No one else would have, either, if the police hadn't gotten wind of the question she asked me about saline solution."

Kirk's face met his levelly. "Do you want an apology or an explanation? I can give you both. I'm sorry about it and—well, suppose you told the police and I didn't? Would that have helped?"

He had to admit Kirk was right. It was impossible to be successfully evasive through hours of questioning. A detective named Maxwell was running the case. Lean, sardonic, he had alternately baited and cajoled Archer. In one breath he announced that Anne had lost her nerve and bolted; in the next, he said she was simply and innocently frightened.

"Maxwell had me cornered all morning," Kirk said. "He finally admitted they haven't the slightest idea where Anne is except that she's still in the city."

"How do they know?"

"A druggist identified her. She was in his store this morning. Wanted to look through his prescription files. It dawned on him later who she was."

"Prescription files . . . why?"

Kirk was slow in answering. "I don't know. Maxwell didn't say." Speculation edged the man's tone, just as it had others'. The unspoken accusation was plain: if Anne Bronson, why not Bill Archer, too?

Defensiveness must have shown in the young doctor's face. Tolman slapped him

lightly on the arm. "Break it up, Bill. Let's have a drink for the old year."

"All I've got in the place is medicinal alcohol."

"Medical school ruined my taste for it," Kirk said. "How about the place down the street?"

Bill Archer glanced at his watch. It was after nine, past time for his call on the Faulkner boy. But he wanted Kirk with him. Tonight, even more than before, he dreaded another solitary evening in the empty rooms.

"I've got to make a call, Kirk. It won't take half an hour. I'll look for you down the street. Or you can wait here if you want."

Tolman nodded as the young doctor pulled on his coat, picked up his bag and left. Midway in the block a sedan passed him and a noisemaker hooted raucously. He smiled faintly and raised a hand in return.

Happy New Year! Ring out the old and welcome in the new. How many times had Anne and he done that together? This would have made the third. Only a few nights before they had made plans, sitting in his car parked along the Shore Drive, looking out over the dark, restless water.

"And a table next to the orchestra," Anne said. "I'll wear a new strapless evening gown—something startling." Laughing, she lifted her face to him. In the faint light it was a pale oval, framed by her beautiful golden hair.

"I'll furnish the orchid, but where would you pin it on a strapless dress?" he grinned.

Anne frowned. "I really don't know." Her fingers laced around his wrist. "Never mind the table next to the orchestra. I'll settle for popcorn and a bag of confetti."

"Popcorn it is. Bushels of it."

He kissed her then. It was a long kiss that left them both trembling.

"How long, Bill?" she breathed against his cheek. "How much longer?"

He shook his head wordlessly. For better or for worse, the marriage ceremony proclaimed, but if it was all worse and no better, marriage didn't have much of a chance.

Maybe he had been wrong. You had to gamble sometime, take a plunge on blind

hope. At least if they had, all this would never have happened.

On Third Street he turned in a doorway and climbed a flight of scuffed stairs. The harassed face of the woman who answered the door lighted up at the sight of him.

"I'm glad you came, doctor. Sammy is awful feverish."

Archer followed her into a tiny bedroom. The plaster was stained and gummed tape patched a broken window. A boy lay in the single bed, flushed, his eyes fever-bright.

"Throat pretty sore, eh, Sammy," Archer said.

Mrs. Faulkner was waiting for him when he finished his examination. Archer said, "Those tonsils will have to come out. He's a sick boy."

She twisted the plain gold band on her finger, working it around and around with a kind of suppressed intensity. "I don't know what to do. My husband isn't working regular. The bill—"

"Don't let that stop you," Archer broke in. "We'll work out something. Sammy is the important thing."

It was always that way. He descended the narrow steps, gingerly trying the broken treads. You couldn't turn your back on kids like Sammy just because their parents were against the wall. You did what you could.

HE PULLED his collar tight against the cold rain, threading through the crowd that surged along the sidewalk in spite of the weather. Paper streamers twisted limply from lamp standards and a sprinkling of confetti lay sodden underfoot. Archer lengthened his stride. The call had taken longer than he had forecast. By now Kirk might have tired of waiting and left.

It was strange how their lives had crossed again after so many years. In medical school they had been close, almost inseparable, and, as Archer occasionally reflected, not without purpose. During Tolman's third and last year of medicine, Archer had carried him as far as possible. It wasn't lack of ability on Kirk's part; he had simply discovered that a medical text didn't afford a very entertaining evening.

Tolman had quit, discarded medicine for a succession of jobs with glowing promise

and meager fulfillment. There had been only chance meetings afterwards, the vague insistence that they get together sometime soon. Archer had never discovered what whim caused Kirk to think of him when Mrs. Lustin needed a doctor. A case of reciprocity, perhaps, or more likely, an opportunity to play lord of the manor.

But whatever the reason for tonight's meeting, Archer was grateful for Kirk's company, anxious for it. He crossed Third Street with a quick step and turned down the side street to his office.

He saw the crowd then, the cluster of people in the rain-slick street, ringed in a grimly attentive circle almost in front of his door.

A sense of dread, almost terror, lanced through him. All the foreboding he had felt for days focused on the scene before him. With icy certainty he knew Anne was there at the hub of the crowd. Arrested, hurt, or was it something worse? Over the heads of the people he saw the gray sedan stopped at a crazy angle in the middle of the street, the door open on the driver's side, glimpsed the police car double-parked by the sedan.

His medicine bag opened a path for him, carried him to the form huddled on the pavement. A girl, motionless, her face dead-white under streaks of mud, and even darker streaks streaming from a cut on her cheek.

A slickered patrolman turned from the crowd. "You a doc?"

Archer scarcely heard the question. Something squeezed tight inside him, forcing out everything except the girl before him.

Anne! The name wrenched from his throat, stopped at his lips. Automatically, he did what training had taught him. Respiration, pulse, check for the tell-tale signs of bleeding at the eyes, mouth or nostrils. And while his hands moved, his mind cried her name.

She was unconscious. The cut on her cheek bled slowly, but beyond that, and a nasty gash on her head, he could find nothing.

Rubber-booted feet moved into the fringe of his vision. A heavy voice complained, "A night for ducks and dopes. Wrecks all over town, drunks beating each other up, and it's just the beginning. Half

hour for the ambulance maybe, Emergen-cy says."

"What happened?" The levelness of Archer's voice surprised him.

"She run out between two parked cars. A couple of guys on the other side of the street saw it happen. The guy driving couldn't miss her." The officer jerked his head at a man standing bareheaded in the rain, his face gray and slack. "Lord, the things people do. Raining like this, dark, and some crazy woman decides to duck out into the street. Hurt bad?"

Some crazy woman. . . . Archer said, "I don't think so. To soon to be sure."

Some crazy woman. . . . She was lost in the anonymity of the city. Too great a gap lay between the blanched, streaked face here and a fuzzy newsprint of a girl in a nurse's cap.

It would be taking a chance, a long, slim chance. And it might be more than just a gamble on guilt or innocence; it might be her life. The bone under that ugly gash could be fractured, but only X-ray could tell.

Society and his profession had imposed a rigid code upon him, and what he planned to do now was against that code, and against the law.

He stood up and glimpsed the corner of a black, corded bag partly hidden under a fold of Anne's coat. He said, "She can't stay in the rain."

"I told you every ambulance—" the patrolman began tiredly.

"My office is across the street. I can treat her there."

He turned, motioned to the brownstone, then brought his hand to an abrupt halt. One face in the circle about him leaped out in sudden familiarity. Kirk Tolman stood within a few feet, his hands thrust deep in the pockets of his overcoat, face shadowed under a hat brim.

Silent appeal flashed in Archer's eyes. "Kirk, she—this girl is hurt. Help me get her to the office."

Tolman hesitated imperceptibly, then brushed close to Archer. In an undertone, he asked, "Know what you're doing?"

Did he? It hardly seemed possible that his career, his freedom and even Anne's life could be risked as simply as this. And to gain what? Only a sense of blind faith motivated him now.

HE STOOPED to Anne's side, looked up quickly at the patrolman. The cop was breaking a path through the crowd, his back to Archer. With a forced casualness Archer scooped up the girl's purse, dropped it in his open bag. Tolman watched him, shrugging at his folly.

Across the wet street, up the glistening steps, he carried the girl's limp form. In the harsh light of the examining room her face was colorless.

"Her name, doc," the patrolman's voice came from the doorway. "I got to get her name."

Involuntarily, Archer's glance found Kirk across the table, saw the man look quickly at the medicine bag on the floor.

"Didn't you find any identification?" Kirk asked evenly. "All women carry purses. It must be somewhere in the street."

"Yeah." The patrolman was reluctant to trade warmth for the rain outside. "I'll have a look. Well . . . I guess that's all. The station will call you, doc."

Archer let his breath out, turned to the girl. First the cut, then all the check points again. When he straightened, weariness flooded him. Kirk's image danced crazily for an instant and Archer held the table for support.

"What's the verdict?" Tolman's voice boomed hollowly in his ears.

"Concussion, maybe. I don't think it's a fracture. She might regain consciousness in five minutes, or it could be days. The car must have just grazed her. Did you see it?"

Kirk shook his head. "I was having a drink down the street. I started back here and saw the crowd."

Archer wheeled the table out of the room, back along the hallway to his bedroom at the rear. Gently, with Kirk's help, he moved Anne to the bed. He left the door ajar.

"Now what?" Tolman asked.

"Now we wait." Archer took Tolman's arm. "I've put you on a spot, Kirk, but I'll try to leave you out if anything goes wrong."

Kirk stared hard at him. "Listen, Bill. I've strung along with you. Now I want a straight answer. Was Anne hiding here?"

"Here?"

"There's the floor above this, and the

attic, too," Kirk said. "No one ever goes up there. Unless the police searched the house, she could have stayed there indefinitely."

"You think I was hiding her?"

Tolman was silent for a moment. "I'm not saying you were, but the police might. Anne was crossing from this side of the street to the other, *not* in the opposite direction, according to the people who saw it. That means she must have been leaving here."

It didn't seem impossible now. The front door was hardly ever locked. She could have left and returned almost at will. Archer went into the examining room, opened his bag and took out Anne's purse. Curiously, Tolman watched him sort through the contents.

Keys and a billfold with his picture in a celluloid holder, taken on a picnic last spring. Lipstick and a receipt for a night's lodging in a small hotel, dated that morning and made out to a Miss Bradley. Wordlessly, he handed the last to Kirk.

Then he found the yellow pages of a telephone directory, ripped from the book.

It was the druggists' section, two pages of alphabetical listing with penciled checks running hit and miss through them. He traced the names: *Paramount Drugs . . . Premier Drug Store . . . Preston & Samuels . . .*

Frowning, he held out the sheets to Kirk, who glanced at them and let them fall to the table. "This bears out Maxwell's story, doesn't it?"

Archer studied the list again, running his finger down the sheets. *Colton Drugs . . . Crown Pharmacy . . .*

The last was a store within three blocks of his office, and a check stood opposite the name. He made up his mind suddenly. Halfway into his damp overcoat, he said, "I'm going to find out what this means."

"But—"

"I know what you're going to say. Give me until—" He glanced at his watch. It was nearly eleven. "Until midnight. If I don't get anywhere by then, you can call the police. But stay with Anne while I'm gone."

Tolman's voice followed him to the door. "You don't even know what you're doing."

"I admit it," Archer threw over his

shoulder. "But I'll sure enough find out."

As he swung down the steps, a trio of giggling girls passed him, showered confetti in his face. Ahead of him the neon sign of the Crown Pharmacy glittered ruby-red in the night. One block, then another, and he turned in the entrance and hurried over to the prescription counter.

Yes, there had been a girl such as he described. She had been in about this time the night before.

"What did she want?"

"Well . . ." The druggist was becoming concerned. "I suppose it was unusual. She asked to look at our prescriptions. I let her. She seemed like a nice girl and she said she was a nurse."

"Then what?"

The man shrugged. "Nothing. She thanked me and left."

A prescription. . . . Archer stood beside the entrance, scanning the list of drug stores. There was no order to the checks. They ran hit and miss, a few in succession, then to the next letter of the alphabet. To him, they were a hodge-podge, without purpose or direction. It would take days to check every store in town, perhaps weeks, and he had until midnight. Anne must have had some system, but . . .

He snapped his fingers. There were two ways of doing it. One was to go through the listings in order; the other by location. Painstakingly, he studied the sequence of check marks, and when he had finished, he was sure of Anne's method. With luck, he could follow her steps.

The taxi stand outside was deserted. Fifteen minutes or a half hour, the dispatcher told him. He replaced the receiver in the call box, jammed his hands in his pockets and started walking.

THE druggist remembered her. "Sure.

Around eight, or maybe a little later. In a hurry and worn out. I remember she was awful pale and sort of dazed looking. I told her to sit down, but she left."

"What did she find?"

"Nothing, I guess."

Archer clenched his fingers. "She had to! This was the last place on the list."

The druggist stared at him in bewilderment. "Look, mister, I don't know what you're talking about."

"This—" He flattened the crumpled

pages on the counter. His face was scored with fatigue. "You're the Premier. Before she came here, she went to the Parliament, and in the same block—" Archer flipped the page—"the Quality and Regal. Don't you see? Why skip them when the addresses are almost next door?"

"That's the trouble with this business," the pharmacist said wearily. "Too much competition."

"After that, she came here. You're next on the list, and the last one checked." His fingers stabbed the page. "She would have gone there . . . and there next, but they aren't checked."

The druggist shook his head helplessly. "I don't know what you want, mister, but half those places are closed. Don't you know it's New Year's Eve?"

Bill Archer let his breath out and grinned wryly. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I guess you're right." He balled the yellow pages in his pocket and went out. That was that, he thought with finality. As a detective, he'd better stick to medicine. Everything he had accomplished could be summed up in one word—nothing.

Aimlessly, he crossed the street, walked back in the direction he had come. His steps took him past the pharmacy midway in the block, small, dark and sandwiched between office buildings. He stopped, cupped his hands against the window and peered in. A single light burned at the rear, dimly lighting the interior. This would be where Anne would have come next, if she—

He straightened abruptly. She had come here, and found what she wanted. Why check the place where the search ended? He found a match, held it to the rectangle of paper fastened inside the door. *In case of emergency, call . . .*

BUT it's New Year's." The faintly blurred voice came over the telephone line against a background of laughter and high-pitched voices. "I got friends here."

"Just fifteen minutes," Archer pleaded. "It could mean everything."

"Yeah, and then it'll be midnight almost. Look, I'll open up for you tomorrow. How about that? Nothing's going to happen to the prescription. I locked it up like the girl asked."

"Tomorrow is too late!" Archer snapped. "It's now that counts."

He heard a muffled conversation at the other end, a woman's complaining voice, and a final, explosive, "Oh, hell!"

He went back to the darkened store. Five minutes dragged by while he paced the deserted sidewalk. Then ten. It was almost eleven-thirty when a cab pulled up and a small man swayed out, fumbled with the latch. "You sure picked a swell time, buddy."

Archer waited impatiently while the druggist opened a locked cabinet in the rear of the store. The man groped inside, found a square of paper. "Here it is. Now what makes it so damn important?"

His words were lost. The young doctor stared incredulously at the prescription. It was on his own form, name and address printed at the head, and bearing a passable imitation of his signature. Charles Gray was the patient's name—one totally unknown to Archer.

"A diabetic, huh?" the druggist said at his elbow. "Ten cc's of U-40 insulin, a hypo and—what's the normal saline for?"

"Did you fill this?"

"Sure I filled it. But I don't remember them all, not doing fifty a day."

"How long ago was the girl here?"

"Couple hours. I was just closing."

Understanding came to Bill Archer, not with shattering brilliance, but easily, simply, as if a page had turned and events and incidents were pictured in a different light. And with it came a sharp realization that left him weak.

He had made one mistake—one single, glaring mistake—but only now he saw it.

"I've got to use your cab."

"Say, listen!" Something stopped the man—the urgency in Archer's tone, the rigid set to his features. Or maybe it was only the ten-dollar bill Archer shoved at him. "Okay. Maybe I can get another."

Sitting stiffly on the edge of the seat, Archer urged the cab ahead. The traffic thickened, slowing almost to a standstill. Crowds swarmed across the intersections, filled the sidewalks. The pavement was carpeted with confetti and streamers fluttered damply in the air.

The driver shook his head when Archer asked him to make better time. "Try walking. You'll get there faster."

He left the cab, shouldered his way along the sidewalk. He dodged pom-poms thrust

in his face, ducked around slow-moving groups, half-trotting against the press of people. Two blocks, three. He turned down a sidestreet, wedged himself through a knot of weaving men. The hands of his watch stood at ten of twelve, and he broke into a run. Someone yelled behind him; a burst of laughter drifted through the hissing rain.

His street finally, the row of apartment buildings and old homes, peaceful and serene. No crowd stood in the street before his steps now, and only a few windows glowed in the night. He moved up the stairs to his door, just as Anne must have done an hour before. She had come, expecting to find him, and instead found a man who had murdered once and wouldn't stop at a second murder to protect himself.

The fear crowding her eyes, the accusation stark in her face—he would have seen that and known its meaning. So when she ran, he followed out into the rainswept night.

Some crazy woman . . . The phrase came back to Bill Archer. Fear had sent Anne running blindly into the path of the car—crazed, yes, but with the instinct of self-preservation.

He reached the door of the bedroom, pulled it wide. The single lamp still burned, but the room was empty.

"Anne!"

Her name echoed hollowly in the silent hall. His office was deserted, the reception room empty.

"Anne!"

No answer but the faint, repeated echo. He went back in the bedroom, searched hurriedly through a bureau drawer, then straightened slowly, his face grim. The holster that held his service pistol was there, but the gun was missing.

He started up the stairs to the second floor. The shadows of the upper hall reached out to enfold him and a musty closeness lay there. He moved silently, straining to hear a sound. Anne had to be somewhere here, and with her, Tolman. Ever since Anne Bronson's disappearance, Kirk must have been waiting, watching the one place she would come.

He'd taken very little chance. Only the slimmest possibility existed that Mrs. Lustin's death would ever be thought other than natural. And if it wasn't? Well, Anne Bron-

son stood to inherit five thousand dollars, and she had given Mrs. Lustin all of her injections. Even now his risk was slight. Anne Bronson was a fugitive and Archer had shielded her. Tolman had nothing to fear so long as neither of them could point to the lie.

ARCHER reached the turn in the hall and hesitated. He knew he should call the police, yet Anne's safety was a lever that forced him on. Tolman had baited the trap with the one thing that would bring Archer to him, alone and without help.

A sound came from farther down the hall. It might be the beat of wind against a loose window, the shifting of old timbers. He couldn't be sure. Uncertainly, he moved forward, weighing his chances. However slight, they couldn't be less than Anne's when she began her search for evidence against Tolman. There again the man had gambled very little. A routine prescription, buried in the files of one of the hundreds of stores in town. But it had to be somewhere. That was Anne's gamble against his. The moment she voiced suspicion against anyone it would focus on her, and to a far greater extent. Her choice, if it could be called one, was to remain silent, or endanger herself.

The sound he had heard before came again, clearer this time. A muffled scuffling.

"Anne!"

His voice seemed unnaturally loud. He realized for the first time that his hands were clenched until they ached. A cold tightness spread across his back. For an instant he stood outside the room from which the sound seemed to come. His fingers tightened on the knob and he jerked it open.

Only the black well of a curtained room stood before him. A slit of light showed beneath the edge of the window shade. No sound or movement met him, yet he sensed the presence of someone else. He took a tentative step forward.

"Bill! Look out!"

Anne's cry lashed at him from the darkness, smothered as if a hand had choked it off. Archer spun out of the lighted doorway as a tongue of flame spurted at him. The report of the heavy pistol thundered through the room. Something bit angrily into the wall beside him and snarled into the hall.

Even with the echoes of the shot roaring in his ears, Archer felt a tremendous rush of relief. Archer was alive! Tolman hadn't gotten up the nerve to kill her. He hadn't minding switching injections on a sick old woman, but he couldn't bring himself to shoot Anne in cold blood.

Archer moved forward cautiously. A form bulking in the darkness, a pale blur of a face and the dim luster of steel—these Archer saw as he sprang forward. His fingers hooked over the wrist holding the pistol, forcing it back, and his other arm locked around Tolman's neck. Tolman strained to break the grip. His free hand clubbed Bill's side in bone-breaking drives.

Locked together, they swayed across the room, back against the window. Old, worn latches strained against the weight of the two men; the weathered sash creaked dangerously. Tolman twisted to one side, but Archer forced him back.

The window splintered out of the frame, careened to the street below. Cold air rushed against them, and Archer felt himself plunging through the opening, held in a terror-stricken grip by Tolman. Something caught at his coat, stopped his fall halfway across the sill. Tolman's face was

panic-ridden; his eyes stared wildly and his mouth was open.

"You'll kill us both!"

His cry was muffled by the shriek of a whistle. Sirens wailed, high and piercing, and bells pealed. The city came to tumultuous life at the stroke of midnight, ringing out the old year in a bedlam. No one could have heard the sounds of the two men struggling in the window.

Kirk made a last effort to wrench the pistol free and Archer threw his weight against him, forcing them farther out of the window. For an instant the grip on his coat slackened. Then his knee locked under the sill, stopping his fall.

The pistol dropped from Kirk's hand and disappeared into the blackness below. Archer caught the casing and pulled them back. His body was trembling and he had a crazy desire to laugh. Kirk Tolman slumped against the wall, his face in his hands.

"Oh, Bill, Bill," Anne's lips pressed against his throat. Her cheeks were wet. "I thought you were falling! I couldn't hold on!"

Dr. William Archer grinned idiotically at her. "Popcorn," he panted. "Where can we get some popcorn?"

TURNABOUT

By Lauri Wirta

In several parts of the world crooks have begun to make life hell for "honest" men. In Carlsbad, Czechoslovakia, a thorough-going burglar broke into a business establishment, cracked the safe and spirited away its contents—including the firm's books. A little later the income tax authorities received the books through the mails, with neat little red pencil marks pointing up several entries. Accompanying the notations was the comment:

"This man is a tax-evader. Get after him."

Portland, Oregon, police, during the war, were helped along by a kindly burglar who wrote:

"The guy who lives next door to the police station is a crook, and ought to be prosecuted. I cracked his safe last night and found it full of black-market gas coupons. A Friend."

A California burglar, though, had to appeal to the police for protection. His victim had misrepresented his losses in order to make a profit from his insurance company—and the burglar's colleagues, feeling they had been gypped of their just share, were out to get their leader. The harried hoodlum wrote the police:

"Make him publish a retraction in the papers, or I won't answer for the consequences. If I made the split on his figures—I'd lose money on the deal!"

TOUGH GUY

By FRANK HEUPPER



"You picked the wrong sucker when you fingered my bankroll," Shannon told the dance hall girl. "So guess what, baby—you're gonna help me get it back!"

I BOUGHT the lottery tickets on a Friday morning with my last balboa. The weekly drawing is on Saturday. I hit for a thirtieth share of the third prize—a hundred and fifty bucks.

That same afternoon I took the dough

out to Juan Franco race track. A small brown tout said he knew which one of the runty, flea-bitten goats was fixed to win. Estrellita. I put a hundred dollars on her nose. She came in and paid nine to one.

Just like that! Four months from hand

to mouth. Four months soaking up heat, rain and rum. Four months traveling downhill until the grade ran out. Then just like that, Shannon is off the beach. Shannon can even go home. Something to make a little noise about.

The bus stops at El Tigre on the way back from the track, and that's where I got off. It's right on the rim of Panama City, front on the bay and back to the jungle. One of the better class blue moon traps—which doesn't make it a place to take your Aunt Minnie.

A lithe and tawny-haired babe in a snaky dinner dress took my arm as soon as I walked through the slatted door. She said her name was Dorita. She said she was thirsty. Her English didn't seem any better than my Spanish.

We stood up at the bar and she got her percentage drink . . . colored water in a shot glass. Then I put a fifty-dollar bill on the table and bought for the crowd. Big-shot Shannon. Great guy Shannon. Everybody got charming, especially Dorita.

We went inside and danced to the brassy band. Her English was better on the dance floor . . . the kind she didn't have to speak. It made a lot of promises she probably wouldn't keep. Her scrambled accent sounded much too phony—something she could hide behind when you got right down to the heavy pitch. I didn't care. I just felt like yakking with someone else besides myself.

We sat down at a table and small-talked through three or four more drinks. When the floor show started, she said she had a part in it. She asked me to wait, like I had a great big future. I didn't think I'd better. I was getting a package on, and I'd been rolled before.

I left the table shortly after she did. A cab was waiting right outside, a long and shiny touring car, new in 1932. I told the driver I wanted Pedro Miguel back in the Zone. That's where Fred Beal has his job on the locks. He lets me sack in on his living room couch.

I was dreaming of the stateside trip when the cab pulled up short on a dark and empty corner of Avenida Quatro de Julio, just short of the Zone. A big and nasty looking Panamanian was standing on the sidewalk. He shoved a big and nasty looking Mauser under my nose and smiled.

"Pardon, señor," he said politely. "You weel please to put the wallet on the front seat of the car." He waved the Mauser slowly back and forth. "Thees theeng make the beeg and not so comfor-table hole."

THE driver turned around. He smiled, too. Big-shot Shannon. Great guy Shannon. Everybody's pal. Anybody's sucker. I dropped the wallet on the front seat of the car. What else could I do?

What else could I do but dive through the open side of the touring car and wrap myself around the monkey's gun arm? I twisted it around behind his back, twisted till the Mauser went off in the air and then dropped. He screamed some men's room Spanish. I hit him twice in the stomach. I hit him once again on the side of the face and he went down. Then I kicked him in the head to clinch it.

The driver wasn't a good sport. He didn't hang around. The touring car was halfway down the block already with my salvage money still sitting up there in the front seat.

I leveled three shots after it with the Mauser. Too late to take. Then way down the street a whistle shrieked and hung in the heavy air. Policia Nacional. We weren't seeing eye to eye. I couldn't risk being sociable.

I shoved the Mauser in my belt. I reached down and took the Panamanian's own billfold from his pocket. Then I walked quickly up a sidestreet and in and out more short narrow sidestreets till the fading echoes of the whistle got lost in the busy drone of Avenida Central.

The hot anger cooled off to luke warm. And it was funny. I suddenly stopped thinking about the money and started thinking of Ellen. She was frowning at me from a few thousand miles away. I didn't *have* to kick him in the head. I'd done it automatically. I heard Ellen screaming it again:

You're not the same Dan Shannon that went away. You're nothing human any more. You're bitter, vicious, hard clean through. You hear me, bitter, vicious, hard clean through. . . .

All right. So I thought I had a reason. I'd gone right in with the reserves. I came out with the meemies—the fright nights, when I'd wake up in torn and sweat-soaked sheets. They called it combat fatigue. I'd

killed too many Red Chinese. I killed them with grenades. I killed them with bullets. I killed them with my bayonet. I killed them with my bare hands, too. That was what they trained me for. That was why they sent me.

I promised Ellen time would wear it off. I asked her to help me. She hadn't helped very much. I went back to my old job with the sheriff's office. I got home ahead of time one day and found her clinched with her boyfriend in the garden. They'd been playing footsie ever since I shipped out. I spoiled his pretty face. I spoiled it very good.

Bitter, vicious, hard clean through....

I didn't wait around while the divorce went through. I got on a banana boat and hit the trail for nowhere. My cash ran out in Cristobal on the other side of the canal. I took a job as a bouncer in a joint just like El Tigre. I stayed with it a month or two to keep in whiskey money. Then Fred Beal turned up.

He came in one night half-potted, and got into a rhubarb with one of the girls. He said she tried to pick his pocket. Fred's just a little guy. I had him packaged up and on the way out very fast, but he made a lot of noise. That was when the policeman came running in his tight green uniform. He started laying into Fred with his loaded stick—Fred who was tied up in my hammerlock. I let go of Fred and spread the cop out frosted on the floor.

Me and Fred beat it out together. He had his car nearby. We lammed for his place on the Pacific side. That was the month or so before. I sacked in with him ever since . . . whenever I made it back to his place sober.

Now I was ready, though, to put the cork back in the bottle. I was fed up with being mad at the human race. The act was wearing thin. The whole world wasn't *really* spitting in Dan Shannon's eye. The cards weren't *really* stacked against me. Lady Luck had kissed me twice in the same day—kissed me warmly, too. The brush-off didn't count. *I was going to get the money back.*

THERE were twenty-three dollars in the Panamanian's wallet. There was a picture of a dark and pretty woman with few clothes on. There was a lot of other assorted

junk, but no identification. It didn't make much difference. There was another way.

I walked down Avenida Central to the pawnshop where I had hocked my watch the week before. What I wanted was still there in the window—a souvenir trench knife, for quiet, close-in work. The blade was long, thin and sharp. I went in and bought it. Then I hopped another bus for Pedro Miguel.

Fred was lost and gone on his weekend tear. This time, though, he'd left his rusty convertible behind. I found the keys in his dresser drawer.

By the time I rolled into the palm-ringed parking lot in back of El Tigre, midnight had come and gone. I sat there in the convertible smoking cigarettes and listening to the band blending with the jungle noises. I waited until almost two. I waited until Dorita finally came out the door with another girl.

Most of them shake off the suckers and go home by themselves or with a local boy friend. There was a line-up of cabs waiting out back for the closing hour. Dorita and her girl chum hopped in one and it headed south. I pulled out and followed with the bright moon for my headlights.

We turned onto the Sabanas Road and took it out past the moss-grown ruins of Panama Viejo, then on past Juan Franco again as far as El Coco. The taxi stopped on the outskirts of the suburb and let Dorita off alone in front of a small two-story house. It had a red tile roof, cracked stucco sides and a tired-looking orange tree in the front yard. There was an outside stucco staircase on either side leading up to second-story apartments.

I slowed as the taxi pulled out again and coughed on into town with the other girl. Dorita was halfway up the outside stairs as I went by. I circled slowly around the block. Then I parked off the road just short of the stucco house and smelled the wind.

The population was scanty and sound asleep. The only sign of life was the new-made light in Dorita's apartment. I got out and walked up the stucco staircase toward it. The open window had iron bars sunken into the casement. The heavy, scarred oak door had a lock that looked like it wasn't fooling.

I rapped on the wood sharp and business-

like with the butt of the Mauser. "*Policia!*" I barked in my best *turismo* Spanish. "Open up—pronto!"

I heard a soft "damn" through the open window. A short pause. Then high heels clicked sharply toward the door. It opened up a tiny crack.

"What do you want?" Dorita snapped unpleasantly through the crack. "There's nobody here but me."

"You'll do," I muttered, leaning heavily into the door with my shoulder.

It threw her back into the room off balance. "You!" she said, glaring at me. "Why you're no cop, you—"

I kicked the door shut behind me and clapped my hand over her mouth. The room had cheap-looking wicker furniture and a faded fibre rug, but it was clean—and empty.

"Don't talk loud," I told her. "We want the party private."

She seemed to buy it for the minute. I took her by the hand and we made a quick tour of the bedroom. It was empty, too. If she was scared she didn't show it.

"I'm the only one you'll have to fight," she threw at me. "I thought you were a little too good to be true. You might as well take off, Buster. There's nothing here for you."

Her English had improved a lot. That wasn't all. She'd had time to wash off the honkatonk before I busted in. She still wasn't any debutante, but you'd look twice at her face—if you didn't see her body first. She'd wrapped a negligee around her ripe lines and they curved full and firm now against the filmy silk.

I stopped looking and said, "Never mind the buck and wing. You fingered my mad money, tootsie. We're going to talk about who you did it for."

SHE seemed to look relieved. "If you're chump enough to lose your roll, don't blame it on me," she snapped.

"I'm a chump, all right, Dorita. But I'm not the ordinary kind. You're going to tell me like a nice girl—or you might not be such a pretty girl for a little while."

"I've been slapped around before, Shannon," she said calmly. "It wouldn't get you any place. A long time ago my name was Rita Shaughnessy. That's Irish, too. You know you can't beat much out of a mick."

"I wouldn't *hit* a woman, Rita. You wouldn't look so good with a haircut, though—a crew haircut, honey. It takes a long time to grow back in." I got out the trench knife and put it on the wicker table.

"You wouldn't go that far, Shannon," she said, not sure at all. "You might be hard around the edges, but you aren't that hard, mister."

"Bitter, vicious, hard clean through," I told her like an echo. "That's what the last one told me. Don't try holding out for a sample."

"There's another way, you know, Shannon," she said. "I went for you earlier tonight. You treated me like something human. No rough talk. No passes. I really hoped you'd stick around. Try it that way again. Try just *asking* me. Ask me if I can *guess* where your marbles might have gone."

"All right, Snow White. Where? Put me on the big bullies and I'll treat you to a chocolate soda."

She didn't want to, but she smiled. "I might have even warned you," she said. "But you looked like you'd been out without your mother before. Besides, I got cold feet. Rico set you up—the bartender. You were begging for it when you showed that kind of money. Rico's part of the pipe line. He passes the word along. They must have quite a team. You're not the first sucker. They've been shaking ripe ones out of the palm trees all over the Republic."

"While you sit back and clap?"

"That's right. Sometimes I sit back and clap. In my line of work I don't always run into the fine, high type of customer like you, Shannon. There's another small item, too. Rico knows I've got him catalogued. He promised to look me up if I ever opened my mouth."

"Okay. What rock do we find him under tonight?"

"He has quarters behind the club. You don't go there though, Shannon. A sailor got shot last week when the same crowd took him. You leave it with the *Policia*. Unless you're bullet-proof."

"I'm bullet-proof. I pay off quicker, too."

She took a quick step toward me. She reached her hand up and brushed her fingers lightly through my hair. "If you pay off quick, then buy me that chocolate soda," she whispered surprisingly.

I kissed her and her body moved in tight and warm against me. Her mouth was sweet and soft and knowing. I didn't mind it at all.

"Rico will keep, Shannon," she murmured. "It's too dangerous...at night...alone."

"I won't be alone," I said. "You're coming with me. I like you Rita. That doesn't mean I trust you, too."

Bitter, vicious, hard clean through.

THE conversation didn't exactly sparkle on the way back to El Tigre. The neon was turned off when we got there. The moonlight had no more competition. It whitewashed the long flat lines of the club, and painted lacy, palm-shaped shadows on the walls.

Rita pointed at a row of small and close-set Quonsets out beyond the parking lot. "The last one on the line," she said with a grudge in it. "Go ahead and stick your neck out. Rico won't push over as easy as I did."

"You can't ever tell. You'll do the talking when I knock. Tell him you got to see him. Tell him it's important. Then get out of the way."

"Suppose I am working with him? Suppose I cross you up and tip him off? Then what happens?"

"I wouldn't know until it happened. You might not even know afterwards."

She didn't tip him off. She went through all the right motions. Rico loomed up big, dark and pretty in the doorway, rubbing sleep out of his wide-set eyes. They got wider when he saw me.

"Don't make the gun go off, Rico," I told him. "It's right here in my pocket. I've got my hand around it. Why don't you ask me in? You want to wake the neighbors?"

He gave me a fishy smile. "*No sabe*. No sabe so good, Señor," he said, turning up the palms of his hands.

I had the trench knife in my right hand with the blade tucked up my coat sleeve. I brought it out and raked the metal knuckles hard across his cheek. He staggered back into the dim light of the room and sat down on the floor.

"You sabe that?" I muttered, walking in after him. "Where do your friends hide out? *Donde los compañeros?*"

He reached behind his neck and came up with a knife of his own. Before he could throw it, I moved in fast and kicked it out of his hand. He scrambled halfway up off the floor. I lifted my knee into his chin and he fell out flat on his back. I put the front part of my foot on his windpipe and shut off the air awhile before I talked to him again.

"Where are the boys, Rico? Stop teasing me."

"*No sabe*. No understand," he coughed. I slashed a long tear in the front of his shirt with the trench knife. A little skin came with it.

"No, no, señor," he blubbered. "No... I tell. I take you... Please."

Too bad Ellen couldn't see the show. *Bitter, vicious, hard clean through...*

Rita was waiting by the coupe when we came out. She looked surprised. She said, "There's a chance I sold you short, Shannon. Don't let your success go to your head, though. You still have a long, long way to go, brother."

"Let's get started, then. You ride in the back seat." Rico, I prodded in behind the wheel. "You drive. Drive fast and careful. If there's any accident, you get to be the deadeast part of it."

As I climbed in back with Rita, he turned around and shot some quick, sharp Spanish at her.

"Break that down, Rita. What did he say?"

"You wouldn't find it in your guide-book," she said bitterly.

I pricked his ear with the point of the trench knife. "Keep your mouth shut and drive."

He kept his mouth shut and drove. We headed out and onto the Roosevelt Highway, keeping a steady pace along it. The jungle crept up to the edges of the paving and formed a dark roof over the unlit road. The coupe was all the traffic showing.

Rita found her tongue again. "You still don't trust me, do you, Shannon?" she said.

"Is there any reason why I should?" I countered.

"No, I guess there isn't, at that... She gave you a real bad time, didn't she?"

"Who?" I said, and it sounded stupid.

"Never mind. I've been through it, too," she reminisced. "He had curly blond hair, more charm than a headwaiter, and a mar-

riage license, too. We flew to Argentina for the wedding trip, but the honeymoon was over fast. He turned out to be a globe-trotting con man. He left me flat in Buenos Aires, without a nickel for a trolley ride. That was a year ago. I've been working my way back to the corn belt in easy stages ever since."

"Yeah," I mumbled. "Working everybody you get a chance at."

"Right again, Shannon. I'll take every man I can for all I can, inside the law. They don't get anything but conversation for it, either. I'm a little sour on your sex."

"I suppose that made *me* something special."

"Maybe it did, Shannon. Or maybe I just tried to stall you because I don't wish *anybody* holes in the head."

"Very touching. If it's true you win the beautiful apology. How much further, Rico?"

He squirmed in the front seat. "Queeck . . . few meenits." He said it like he suddenly might be looking forward to it.

"Turn the lights off before we get there. Go in slow and go in quiet. If there's any cute stuff you get the first slug, Rico, right between the ears. Catch on?"

"*Sí, señor, sí,*" he muttered quickly. "No more trouble. . . sure."

WE CAME out into a short stretch of open country two or three miles later. The jungle had been burned off for charcoal on both sides of the road. Rico cut the lights and slowed the coupe. Another half mile further where the foliage began again, he pulled off and stopped on the soft shoulder.

In the moonlight I could pick out a rough dirt road running off to the side. Part way down it I could see the shiny front of the touring car sticking out from behind a clump of bamboo trees. In a clearing at the end there was a small adobe shack, the only house in sight. Rico finished rattling on his friends by pointing a long and nervous finger at it. ~

"Thanks for everything," I told him. Then I smacked him hard below the ear with the butt of the Mauser. He crumpled in the front seat like a run-down top. I just managed to shove him clear of the horn. I got out of the convertible, opened his door and dumped him off among the flora and the

fauna. He lay nice and quiet, out cold.

With the chips down now, that was the smartest and the safest way to handle Rita, too. Then my conscience started turning up from nowhere. I knew I couldn't do it. Her story could be true just as easy as not. Even if it wasn't she had all the trouble she could carry. I couldn't bring myself to run the chance of leaving her to the wolves if the party didn't go my way.

"Give me mine where it doesn't show," she said in a low and bitter voice as I walked back to the coupe.

"Turn the car around and go home," I snapped. "I'll pick it up in the morning."

Her look said a lot of grateful things. Her voice said, "You're getting soft, Shannon. What do *you* do? Creep back on your hands and knees—if you still can creep?"

I nodded at the touring car down the road. "I've got a taxi right here waiting."

She moved her hand quickly to my arm. "Money's cheap, Shannon," she said urgently. "Forget it for tonight. Leave it for the cops to handle. Come back with me . . . now."

"You afraid for me or for your friends?" I growled. "Beat it while the mood lasts."

She shrugged her shoulders and climbed in behind the wheel. She backed the car out quietly and I watched it disappear down the road the way we came.

I stood a minute and soaked up the silence. It was split wide open by the roar of a howler monkey deeper in the jungle. Leaves rustled. Then the quiet closed in again, and it was Pyongyang and Yonchon and Korangpo, with palm trees. I was stalking a Red outpost by the light of the moon.

I moved quickly and carefully along the side of the narrow, grass-grown road, past the touring car and on down toward the clearing. I paused at the edge, waiting for sound. No sound came. No light showed through the narrow windows of the shack. I walked up and glanced through the screening into a single, roughly furnished room.

I felt like a ham overplaying a bit part. There were only two of them inside. They both were corked off soundly on army cots, one along each wall.

I tested the door quietly. It was bolted firm. I was tooled up with the trench knife and the Mauser again. I shot the lock off the door and poured into the room.

The moonlight poured in with me. It

outlined the two of them, shocked awake and sitting upright on the cots.

"Let's be friends," I suggested in the semi-dark. "This theeng make the beeg and not so comfor-table hole—remember?"

THERE was a kerosene lamp sitting on a makeshift table. I talked at the figure on the left. "You get up and make the light, amigo."

He got up like a sleepwalker. He struck a wooden match and touched it to the wick of the lamp. It was "Smiley," the trigger man who loaned me the Mauser. He wasn't smiling now, though. The left side of his face was swollen purple. His left arm hung limply at his side.

The driver was missing. The other boy was a brand new face, dark and pitted, with sleep-mussed hair hanging over a poison look. He hadn't learned yet. He came alive with the light and lunged at me. I tore his thigh open with a short-range slug. He stumbled and fell face-first at my feet with an animal groan.

Smiley didn't budge. He just stood there and sulked. "You are the beeg mistake we make, señor," he complained, just as if he didn't like me. "I theenk I find that out."

"Dig up the dinero and we'll let it go at that. Mucho pronto. No stall, now!"

"Sí, sí," he said quickly. "*No mas, señor.* Please—up there." He pointed toward a space between the eaves of the hut and the top of the adobe wall. I saw what looked like a shoebox, half-hidden by the wooden beams. "I geeve it to you now."

He moved a stool from the table over to the wall and climbed up. Reaching into the opening, he came out with the shoebox—and something else besides. The box dropped from his hand, money scattered on the floor. And there was another automatic in his fist spitting at my head.

I felt the breeze, but not the shock. He was way off balance and shooting with his left hand. I punched a quick shot into his

shoulder and knocked him off the stool. I snatched the automatic from his hand as he slipped down limp along the wall. He settled into a sitting position on the floor. "The beeg mistake..." he said again, sighing with a noise like air escaping from a tire.

I gathered up the nice green money and jammed it in my pockets. I was way ahead for the day. Other suckers before me had fattened up the kitty. And I wasn't stopping to make change.

"Keys!" I said to Smiley, sitting with his hand clutching his shoulder. "For the taxi. *Donde esta? Where?*"

The fight looked all gone out of him. "Een the car," he muttered, whitefaced. I took him at his word and beat it fast.

As I raced back up the grassy road the dirge began again. Shannon, the machine for mayhem. Knives and bullets bounce right off. The devil won't have any part of him; couldn't stand the competition. Shannon, the machine for mayhem. *Bitter, vicious, hard clean through...*

Halfway to the touring car I stopped in my tracks. Out by the highway I saw Fred's car again. Rita hadn't gone any place at all. I started running toward the coupe, my whole attention fixed on it. And that was the mistake I made.

As I brushed past the touring car I saw the motion from the corner of my eye. A figure loomed up sharp and sudden from behind the fender. I turned, flat-footed, to see the moonlight glinting off the long, wide blade of a machete lifted high to split my skull.

Before I could even try to sidestep out of range, another shape sprung off the ground from behind the car, hurtling between us. It knocked me back—knocked the gun out of my hand and caught the down-coming blow of the machete. Caught it with the sound of a butcher's cleaver on the chopping block. It was Rita. She'd come back for me!

The sickness and the fury came in the

—EIGHT AND OUT—

A Brooklyn shopkeeper finally lost his patience. When holdup men invaded his shop for the eighth time, he got mad, ignored their guns, belabored them with fists and pop bottles, and saved the \$70 in the till.

same wave. And so did the driver. He must have been asleep in the touring car when I first came down the road. I went in for him wild and blind.

BEFORE he could raise the machete again, I wrapped my arms around his and pinned them to his body in a bear hug. I jerked the full weight of my shoulder up into his jaw and snapped his head back sharply. Burying my chin into his neck, I pulled him toward me in the middle and levered him over backwards. I raised my knee up high as I went down on top of him and sunk it in his stomach with my whole momentum as we landed, I lifted up his head and slammed it back against the ground. I lifted it again. And then I remembered Rita through the blind sheet of rage.

She'd come back for *me*, and now she lay there limp and lifeless in the grassy road. Her hands were bound behind her with a leather belt. There was a dirty handkerchief jammed into her mouth. I quickly took them both away and raced probing fingers over her. There was a slight swelling at her temple. At the base of her neck a wide and angry welt was growing. She must have caught the *flat* part of the heavy blade. Unbelievably, there was no open wound.

The way it looked, the shots had waked the driver sleeping in the car. Instead of picking the party at the shack, he played it safer. He was laying for me when Rita came along. He must have knocked her out and tied her up. And she'd come to just in time to warn me the only way she could—by throwing herself between us.

I took her carefully in my arms and carried her to the coupe. I cradled her on the front seat, then walked around and pillowed her tawny head in my lap. I drove that way back down through the long, dark and empty tunnel of trees. I poured the coal on till the coupe shook and rattled, but I couldn't shake my conscience.

Break into her room in the middle of the night. Threaten her and shove her around. Treat her like a tramp and a deadbeat. Drag her out into the jungle. Leave her the choice of getting out of town or facing a payoff from Rico and his buddies. And how does she return the favor? By coming

back and taking a machete in the head—for *me*!

Cracked skulls and bullet holes, blood, pain, tears and scars . . . Shannon's calling cards. Never mind *who* gets hurt. Never mind how. Knock 'em down and drag 'em out, pile 'em in the meat wagon. No cure. No help for it. *Bitter, vicious, hard clean through.* . . .

I made the twenty miles to Pedro Miguel in twenty minutes. Fred wasn't home. He wouldn't be coming home. I carried Rita's limp form in and carefully set her down on the couch.

I loosened her tight clothing. I wrapped some crushed ice in a towel and rested it against her neck. I smoothed the silk and tawny hair off her forehead and made another compress for her temple where the driver must have hit her with his fist. Then I knelt beside her and stroked her wrists, trying to coax her eyes back open.

Her high, lovely lines rose and fell in soft rhythm with her breathing. Her clean-lined lips, slightly parted, seemed almost as if they were smiling. The tight wise, lines were gone from her face now. She looked as fresh and untouched as the 4H queen at the county fair. She looked like all the girls I'd ever dreamed about wrapped up in one.

I finally got bright. I got the answer figured out all by myself. Rita was *mine*. They made her specially for me. I had to go the long, long way around to find her, and I didn't know it when I did. But I knew it *now*, as well as my own name.

There was a DC-4 leaving Albrook for Miami before noon. We could be on it. Both of us could be on it. Shannon and Shaughnessy. All I had to do was make her all right. Make her all right and make her listen to me. That was all. I had to find a doctor. Find a doc and pull him out of bed. I got up to go and kissed her lightly on the forehead as I started.

"That's what I've been waiting for," I heard her voice whisper softly. Her eyes were suddenly wide open. "I've been awake and waiting ever since you brought me from the car." She smiled, and it told me everything a smile can tell. Then she said it. She said, "*Shannon, you're the gentlest man I've ever known.*"

And that's when I knew I could be.



Aboard the speeding train, they met again: Simon Pell, recently of Korea, and sultry Marj—recently Mrs. Pell. Marj and her lawyer were hitting Pell for money—30 grand, in fact—and Marj really wanted it bad.



Poor Marj had to pay blackmail or go to prison, for Marj had made the mistake of smuggling a bit of dope. Perhaps she'd land in jail in either case, for the beautiful blonde was a government girl, and mighty curious. . . .



Late that night, Marj called on Pell—and thrust a bloody knife into his hand. That was her cute way of enlisting his help. For Marj had just found the lawyer's corpse in her compartment, and Marj was plenty scared. . . .



Pell was the only one who'd seen the smugglers' torpedo. Right now he wished he hadn't, for that gun wasn't kidding. . . . John D. MacDonald will finish the story in "Trap for a Tigress," in the next issue, published June 4th.

**Intriguing
Murder
Novelette**



By FREDRIC BROWN

TO SLAY A MAN ABOUT A DOG!

CHAPTER ONE

Doggerel of Death

PETER KIDD should have suspected the shaggy dog of something, right away. He got into trouble the first time he saw the animal. It was the first hour of the first day of Peter Kidd's debut as a private investigator. Specifically, ten minutes after nine in the morning.

It had taken will-power on the part of Peter Kidd to make himself show up a dignified ten minutes late to his own office that morning, instead of displaying an unprofessional over-enthusiasm by getting there an hour early. By now, he knew, the deco-

rative secretary he had engaged would have the office open. He could make his entrance with quiet dignity.

The meeting with the dog occurred in the downstairs hallway of the Wheeler Building, halfway between the street door and the elevator. It was entirely the fault of the shaggy dog, who tried to pass to Peter Kidd's right, while the man who held the dog's leash—a chubby little man with a bulbous red nose—tried to walk to the left. It didn't work.

"Sorry," said the man with the leash, as

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The pistol had a long silencer on it. . .



*Rover was a friendly pup,
He wouldn't hurt a fly,
But everywhere that Rover went—
A man was sure to die!*



Peter Kidd stood still, then tried to step over the leash. That didn't work, either, because the dog jumped up to try to lick Peter Kidd's ear, raising the leash too high to be straddled, even by Peter's long legs.

Peter raised a hand to rescue his shell-rimmed glasses, which were in imminent danger of being knocked off by the shaggy dog's display of affection.

"Perhaps," he said to the man with the leash, "you had better circumambulate me."

"Huh?"

"Walk around me, I mean," said Peter. "From the Latin, you know. *Circum*, around—*ambulare*, to walk. Parallel to *circumnavigate*, which means to sail around. From *ambulare* also comes the word *ambulance*—although an ambulance has nothing to do with walking. But that is because it came through the French *hôpital ambulant*, which actually means—"

"Sorry," said the man with the leash. He had already circumambulated Peter Kidd, having started the procedure even before the meaning of the word had been explained to him.

"Quite all right," said Peter.

"Down, Rover," said the man with the leash.

Regretfully, the shaggy dog desisted in its efforts to reach Peter's ear and permitted him to move on to the elevator.

"Morning, Mr. Kidd," said the elevator operator, with the deference due a new tenant who has been introduced as a personal friend of the owner of the building.

"Good morning," said Peter. The elevator took him to the fifth, and top floor. The door clanged shut behind him, and he walked with firm stride to the office door upon which—with chaste circumspection—golden letters spelled out:

PETER KIDD

PRIVATE INVESTIGATIONS

He opened the door, and went in. Everything in the office looked shiny new, including the blonde stenographer behind the typewriter desk. She said, "Good morning, Mr. Kidd. Did you forget the letterheads you were going to pick up on the floor below?"

He shook his head. "Thought I'd look in first to see if there were any—ah—"

"Clients? Yes, there were two. But

they didn't wait. They'll be back in fifteen or twenty minutes."

Peter Kidd's eyebrows lifted above the rims of his glasses. "Two? Already?"

"Yes. One was a pudgy-looking little man. Wouldn't leave his name."

"And the other?" asked Peter.

"A big shaggy dog," said the blonde. "I got his name, though. It's Rover. The man called him that. He tried to kiss me."

"Eh?" said Peter Kidd.

"The dog, not the man. The man said, 'Down, Rover,' so that's how I know his name."

PETER looked at her reprovingly. He said, "I'll be back in five minutes," and went down the stairs to the floor below. The door of the Harrison printshop was open, and he walked in and stopped in surprise just inside the doorway. The pudgy man and the shaggy dog were standing at the counter. The man was talking to Mr. Harrison, the proprietor.

"That will be all right," he was saying. "I'll pick them up Wednesday afternoon, then. And the price is two-fifty?" He took a wallet from his pocket and opened it. There seemed to be about a dozen bills in it. He put one on the counter. "Afraid I have nothing smaller than a ten."

"Quite all right, Mr. Asbury," said Harrison, taking change from the register. "Your cards will be ready for you."

Meanwhile, Peter walked to the counter also, keeping a safe distance from the shaggy dog. From the opposite side of the barrier Peter was approached by a female employee of Mr. Henderson. She smiled at him and said, "Your order is ready. I'll get it for you."

When she went to the back room, Peter edged along the counter and read, upside down, the name and address written on the order blank lying there: Robert Asbury, 633 Kenmore Street. The telephone number was BEacon 3434. The man and the dog, without noticing Peter Kidd this time, went on their way out of the door.

Harrison said, "Hullo, Mr. Kidd. The girl taking care of you?"

Peter nodded, and the girl came from the back room with his package. A sample letterhead was pasted on the outside. He looked at it, and said, "Nice work. Thanks."

Back upstairs, Peter found the pudgy

man sitting in the waiting room, still holding the shaggy dog's leash.

The blonde said, "Mr. Kidd, this is Mr. Smith, the gentleman who wishes to see you. And Rover."

The shaggy dog ran to the end of the leash, and Peter Kidd patted its head and allowed it to lick his hand. He said, "Glad to know you, Mr.—ah—Smith?"

"Aloysius Smith," said the little man. "I have a case I'd like you to handle for me."

"Come into my private office, then, please, Mr. Smith. You don't mind if my secretary takes notes of our conversation?"

"Not at all," said Mr. Smith, trotting along at the end of the leash after the dog, which was following Peter Kidd into the inner office. Everyone but the shaggy dog took chairs.

The shaggy dog tried to climb up on to the desk, but was dissuaded.

"I understand," said Mr. Smith, "that private detectives always ask a retainer." He took the wallet from his pocket and began to take ten-dollar bills out of it. He took out ten of them and put them on the desk. "I hope a hundred dollars will be sufficient."

"Ample," said Peter Kidd. "What is it you wish me to do?"

The little man smiled deprecatingly. He said, "I'm not exactly sure. But I'm scared. Somebody has tried to kill me—twice. I want you to find the owner of this dog. I can't just let it go, because it follows me now. I suppose I could—uh—take it to the pound or something, but maybe these people would keep on trying to kill me. And anyway, I'm curious."

Peter Kidd took a deep breath. He said, "So am I. Can you put it a bit more succinctly?"

"Huh?"

"Succinctly," said Peter Kidd patiently, "comes from the Latin word, *succinctus*, which is the past participle of *succingere*, the literal meaning of which is to gird up, but in this sense it—"

"I knew I'd seen you before," said the pudgy man. "You're the circumabulate guy. I didn't get a good look at you then, but—"

"Circumambulate," corrected Peter Kidd.

The blonde quit drawing pothooks and looked from one to another of them. "What

was that word?" she asked, bewildered.

PETER KIDD grinned. "Never mind, Miss Lathan. I'll explain later. Ah—Mr. Smith, I take it you are referring to



If Acid Indigestion comes
And tries to rock the boat
Settle it with Alka-Seltzer
Before it gets your goat

First Aid For **ACID
INDIGESTION**

**Your
BEST BET**
Is a Glass of Sparkling,
Refreshing

**ALKA-
SELTZER**
BRAND—Reg. U.S. Pat. Off.

DEPENDABLE
Fast Acting
PLEASANT TASTING
Alkalizing
NOT A LAXATIVE

ALSO RELIEF FOR
HEADACHE
COLD MISERY
MUSCULAR PAIN



AT ALL DRUG STORES • U.S. and CANADA

the dog which is now with you. When and where did you acquire it, and how?"

"Yesterday, early afternoon. I found it on Vine Street near Eighth. It looked and acted lost and hungry. I took it home with me. Or rather, it followed me home once I'd spoken to it. It wasn't until I'd fed it at home that I found the note tied to its collar."

"You have that note with you?"

Mr. Smith grimaced. "Unfortunately, I threw it into the stove. It sounded so utterly silly, but I was afraid my wife would find it and get some ridiculous notion. You know how women are. It was just a little poem, and I remember every word of it. It was—uh—kind of silly, but—"

"What was it?"

The pudgy man cleared his throat. "It went like this:

*'I am the dog
Of a murdered man.
Escape his fate, Sir,
If you can.'*

"Alexander Pope," said Peter Kidd.

"Eh? Oh, you mean Pope, the poet. You mean that's something of his?"

"A parody on a bit of doggerel Alexander Pope wrote about two hundred years ago, to be engraved on the collar of the King's favorite dog. If I recall rightly, it was:

*'I am the dog
Of the King at Kew.
Pray tell me, Sir,
Whose dog are you?'*

The little man nodded. "I'd never heard it, but— Yes, it would be a parody all right. The original's clever. *Whose dog are you?* He chuckled, then sobered abruptly. "I thought my verse was funny, too, but last night—"

"Yes?"

"Somebody tried to kill me. Twice. At least, I think so. I took a walk downtown, leaving the dog home, incidentally, and when I was crossing the street only a few blocks from home, an auto *tried* to hit me."

"Sure it wasn't accidental?"

"Well, the car actually swerved out of its way to get me, when I was only a step off the curb. I was able to jump back, by a split second, and the car's tires actually scraped

the curb where I'd been standing. There was no other traffic, no reason for the car to swerve."

"Could you identify the car? Did you get the number?"

"I was too startled. It was going too fast. By the time I got a look at it, it was almost a block away. All I know is that it was a sedan, dark blue or black. I don't even know how many people were in it, if there were more than one. Of course, it *might* have been just a drunken driver. I thought so, until, on my way home, somebody took a shot at me.

"I was walking past the mouth of a dark alley. I heard a noise and turned just in time to see the flash of the gun, about twenty or thirty yards down the alley. I don't know by how much the bullet missed me—but it did. I ran the rest of the way home."

"Couldn't have been a backfire?"

"Absolutely not. The flash was at shoulder level above the ground, for one thing. No, I'm sure it was a shot."

"There have never been any other attempts on your life, before this? You have no enemies?"

"No, to both questions, Mr. Kidd."

Peter Kidd interlocked his long fingers and looked at them. "And just what do you want me to do?"

"To find out where the dog came from and take him back there. To—uh—take the dog off my hands meanwhile. To find out what it's all about."

Peter Kidd nodded. "Very well, Mr. Smith. You gave my secretary your address and phone number?"

"My address, yes. But please don't call me or write me. I don't want my wife to know anything about this. She is very nervous, you know. I'd rather drop in after a few days to see you for a report. If you find it impossible to keep the dog, you can board it with a veterinary for some length of time."

When the pudgy man had left, the blonde asked, "Shall I transcribe these notes I took?"

Peter Kidd snapped his fingers at the shaggy dog. He said, "Never mind, Miss Latham. Won't need them."

"Aren't you going to work on the case?"

"I *have* worked on the case," said Peter. "It's finished."

The blonde's eyes were big as saucers.

She gasped, "You mean you've solved it?"

"Exactly," said Peter Kidd. He rubbed the backs of the shaggy dog's ears and the dog seemed to love it. "Our client's right name is Robert Asbury, of six-thirty-three Kenmore Street, telephone three-four-three-four. He is an actor by profession, and out of work. He did not find the dog, for the dog was given to him by one Sidney Wheeler, who purchased the dog for that very purpose, undoubtedly—and who also provided the hundred dollar fee. There's no question of murder."

Peter Kidd tried to look modest, but succeeded only in looking smug. After all, he'd solved his first case—such as it was—with-out leaving his office.

He was dead right, too, on all counts except one:

The shaggy dog murders had hardly started. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

"The Dog of a Murdered Man"

THE little man with the bulbous nose went home—not to the address he had given Peter Kidd, but the one he had given the printer to put on the cards he'd had engraved.

His name, of course, was Robert Asbury and not Aloysius Smith. For all practical purposes, that is, his name was Robert Asbury. He had been born under the name of Herman Gilg. But he'd changed it in the interests of euphony many years ago, the first time he had trodden the boards. 633 Kenmore Street was a theatrical boarding house.

Robert Asbury entered, whistling. A little pile of mail on the hall table yielded two bills and a theatrical trade paper for him. He pocketed the bills unopened and was looking at the Wanted's in the trade paper when the door at the back of the hall opened.

Mr. Asbury closed the magazine hastily, smiled his most winning smile. He said, "Ah, Mrs. Drake."

It was Hatchet-Face herself, but she wasn't frowning. Must be in a good mood. Swell! The five dollars he could give her on account, would really tide him over. He took it from his wallet with a flourish.

"Permit me," he said, "to make a slight

payment on last week's room and board, Mrs. Drake. Within a few days I shall—"

"Yes, yes," she interrupted. "Same old story, Mr. Asbury. But maybe this time it's true even if you don't know it yet. Gentleman here to see you, and he says it's about a role."

"Here? You mean he's waiting in the—"

"No, I had the parlor all torn up, cleaning. I told him he could wait in your room."

He bowed. "Thank you, Mrs. Drake."

He managed to walk, not run, to the stairway, and start the ascent with dignity. But who the devil would call to see him about a role? There were dozens of producers who might phone him, but it couldn't be a producer calling in person. More likely some friend telling him where there was a spot he could try out for.

Even that would be a break. He'd felt it in his bones that having all that money in his wallet this morning had meant luck. A hundred and ten dollars! True, only ten of it was his own, and Lord, how it had hurt to hand out that hundred! But the ten meant five for his landlady and two and a half for the cards he absolutely *had* to have—you can't send in your card to producers unless you have the cards to send in—and cigarette money for the balance.

Funny job, that was. The length some people will go to play a practical joke. But it was just a joke and nothing crooked, because this Sidney Wheeler was supposed to be a right guy, and after all, he owned that office building and a couple of others; probably a hundred bucks was like a dime to him. Maybe he'd want a follow-up on the hoax, another call at this Kidd's office. That would be another easy ten bucks.

He couldn't quite figure out that Peter Kidd. Sure didn't look like a detective; he looked more like a college professor. But a good detective *ought* to be part actor and not look like a shamus. This Kidd sure talked like a professor, too. Circum—circumambulate, and—uh—succinctly. "Perhaps you had better circumambulate me succinctly." Goofy! And that "from the Latin" stuff!

The door of his room was an inch ajar, and Mr. Asbury pushed it open, started through the doorway. Then he tried to stop and back out again.

There was a man sitting in the chair fac-

ing the doorway, only a few feet from it—the opening door had just cleared the man's knees. Mr. Asbury didn't know the man, didn't *want* to know him. He disliked the man's face at sight and disliked still more the fact that the man held a pistol with a long silencer on the barrel. The muzzle was aimed toward Mr. Asbury's third vest button.

Mr. Asbury tried to stop too fast. He stumbled, which, under the circumstances, was particularly unfortunate. He threw out his hands to save himself. It must have looked to the man in the chair as though Mr. Asbury was attacking him, making a diving grab for the gun.

The man pulled the trigger. . . .

I AM the dog of a murdered man," said the blonde. "Escape my fate, Sir, if you can." She looked up from her shorthand notebook. "I don't get it."

Peter Kidd smiled and looked at the shaggy dog, which had gone to sleep in the comfortable warmth of a patch of sunlight under the window.

"Purely a hoax," said Peter Kidd. I had a hunch Sid Wheeler would try to pull something of the sort. The hundred dollars is what makes me certain. That's the amount Sid thinks he owes me."

"Thinks he *owes* you?"

"Sid Wheeler and I went to college together. He was full of ideas for making money, even then. He worked out a scheme of printing special souvenir programs for intramural activities and selling advertising in them. He talked me into investing a hundred dollars with the understanding that we'd split the profits. That particular idea of his didn't work and the money was lost.

"He insisted, though, that it was a debt, and after he began to be successful in real estate, he tried to persuade me to accept it. I refused, of course. I'd invested the money and I'd have shared the profits if there'd been any. It was *my* loss, not his."

"And you think he hired this Mr. Smith?"

"Of course. Didn't you see that the whole story was silly? Why would anyone put a note like that on a dog's collar and then try to kill the man who found the dog?"

"A maniac might, mightn't he?"

"No. A homicidal maniac isn't so devi-

ous. He just kills. Besides, it was quite obvious that Asbury's story was untrue. For one thing, the fact that he gave a false name is pretty fair proof in itself. For another, he put the hundred dollars on the desk before he even explained what he wanted. If it was his own hundred dollars, he wouldn't have been so eager to part with it. He'd have asked me how much of a retainer I'd need.

"I'm only surprised Sid didn't think of something more believable. He underrated me. Of all things—a lost shaggy dog."

The blonde said, "What's wrong with that? Oh, I think I know what you mean. There's a shaggy dog *story*, isn't there?"

Peter Kidd nodded. "The shaggy dog story, the archetype of all the esoteric jokes whose humor lies in sheer nonsensicality. A New Yorker, who has just found a large white shaggy dog, reads in a New York paper an advertisement offering five hundred pounds sterling for the return of such a dog, giving an address in London. The New Yorker compares the markings given in the advertisement with those of the dog he has found and immediately takes the next boat to England. Arrived in London, he goes to the address given and knocks on the door. A man opens it. 'You advertised for a lost dog,' says the American, 'a shaggy dog.' 'Oh,' says the Englishman coldly, 'not so *darned* shaggy' . . . and he slams the door in the American's face."

The blonde giggled, then looked thoughtful. "Say, how did you know that fellow's right name?"

Peter Kidd told her about the episode in the printing shop. He said, "Possibly he didn't intend to go there when he left here, or he wouldn't have taken the elevator downstairs first. Undoubtedly he saw Harrison's listing on the board in the lobby, remembered he needed cards, and took the elevator back up."

The blonde sighed. "I suppose you're right. What are you going to do about it?"

He looked thoughtful. "Return the money to Sid, of course. But maybe I can think of some way of turning the joke. After all, if I'd fallen for it, it *would* have been funny . . ."

THE man who had just killed Robert Asbury didn't think it was funny. He was scared and he was annoyed.

He stood at the washstand in a corner of Asbury's dingy little room, sponging away at the front of his coat with a soiled towel. The little guy had fallen right into his lap. Luckily, in one way, because he hadn't thudded on the floor. Unluckily, in another way, because of the blood that had stained his coat. Blood on one's clothes is to be deplored at any time. It is especially deplorable when one has just committed a murder.

He threw the towel down in disgust, then picked it up and began very systematically to wipe off the faucets, the bowl, the chair, and anything else upon which he might have left fingerprints.

A bit of cautious listening at the door convinced him that the hallway was empty. He let himself out, wiping first the inside knob and then the outside one, and tossing the dirty towel back into the room through the open transom.

He paused at the top of the stairs and looked down at his coat again. Not too bad. It looked as though he'd spilled a drink down the front of it. The towel had taken out the color of blood, at least.

And the pistol, a fresh cartridge in it, was ready if needed, thrust through his belt, under his coat. The landlady—well, if he didn't see her on the way out, he'd take a chance on her being able to identify him. He'd talked to her only a moment, and she might not remember his face.

He went down the steps quietly and got through the front door without being heard. He walked rapidly, turning several corners, and then went into a drugstore which had an enclosed phone booth. He dialed a number.

He recognized the voice that answered. He said, "This is—me. I saw the guy. He didn't have it. . . . Uh, no, couldn't ask him. I—well, he won't talk to anyone about it now, if you get what I mean."

He listened, frowning. "Couldn't help it," he said. "Had to. He—uh—well, I had to. That's all. . . . See Whee—the other guy? Yeah, guess that's all we can do now. Unless we can find out what happened to—*it*. . . . Yeah, nothing to lose, now. I'll go see him right away."

Outside the drugstore, the killer looked himself over again. The sun was drying his coat and the stain hardly showed. Better not worry about it, he thought, until he

was through with this business. Then he'd change clothes and throw this suit away.

He took an unnecessarily deep breath, like a man nerving himself up to something, and then started walking rapidly again. He went to an office in a building about ten blocks away.

"Mr. Wheeler?" the receptionist asked. "Yes, he's in. Who shall I say is calling?"

"He doesn't know my name. But I want to see him about renting a property of his, an office."

The receptionist nodded. "Go right in. He's on the phone right now, but he'll talk to you as soon as he's finished."

"Thanks, sister," said the man with the stain on his coat. He walked to the door marked *Private—Sidney Wheeler*, went through it and closed it behind him. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

"Escape His Fate, Sir, If You Can"

STRETCHED out in the patch of sunlight by the window, the white shaggy dog slept peacefully. "Looks well fed," said the blonde. "What are you going to do with him?"

Peter Kidd said, "Give him back to Sid Wheeler, I suppose. And the hundred dollars, too, of course."

He put the bills into an envelope, stuck the envelope into his pocket. He picked up the phone and gave the number of Sid Wheeler's office. When he got the connection, he asked for Sid.

He said, "Sid?"

"Speaking. . . . Hold on just a minute. . . ."

He heard a noise like the receiver being put down on the desk, and waited. After a few minutes Peter said, "hello," tried again two minutes later and then hung up his own receiver.

"What's the matter?" asked the blonde.

"He forgot to come back to the phone."

Peter Kidd tapped his fingers on the desk. "Maybe it's just as well," he added thoughtfully.

"Why?"

"It would be letting him off too easily, merely to tell him that I've seen through the hoax. Somehow, I ought to be able to turn the tables, so to speak."

"Ummm," said the blonde. "Nice, but

how will you go about it? Have any idea?"

"Something in connection with the dog, of course. I'll have to find out more about the dog's antecedents, I fear."

The blonde looked at the dog. "Are you sure it *has* antecedents? And if so, hadn't you better call in a veterinary right away?"

Kidd frowned at her. "I must know whether he bought the dog at a pet shop, found it, got it from the pound, or whatever. Then I'll have something to work on."

"But how can you find that out? Oh, you're going to see Mr. Asbury and ask him. Is that it?"

"That will be the easiest way, if he knows. And he probably does. Besides, I'll need his help in reversing the hoax. He'll know, too, whether Sid had planned a follow-up of his original visit."

He stood up. "I'll go there now. I'll take the dog along. He might need—he might have to—ah—a bit of fresh air and exercise may do him good. Here, Rover, old boy."

He clipped the harness to the dog's collar, started to the door. He turned. "Did you make a note of that number on Kenmore Street? It was six hundred something, but I've forgotten the rest of it."

The blonde shook her head. "I made notes of the interview, but you told me that afterwards. I didn't write it down."

"No matter. I'll get it from the printer."

Harrison, the printer, wasn't busy. His assistant was talking to Captain Burgoyne of the police, who was ordering tickets for a policemen's benefit dance. Harrison came over to the other end of the railing to Peter Kidd. He looked down at the dog with a puzzled frown.

"Say," he said, "didn't I see that pooch about an hour ago, with someone else?"

Kidd nodded. "With a man named Asbury, who gave you an order for some cards. I wanted to ask you what his address is."

"Sure, I'll look it up. But what's it all about? He lost the dog and you find it, or what?"

KIDD hesitated. Then he remembered that Harrison knew Sid Wheeler, and he told him the main details of the story. The printer grinned appreciatively.

"And you want to make the gag back-

fire," he chuckled. "Swell. If I can help you, let me know. Just a minute and I'll give you this Asbury's address."

He leafed a few sheets down from the top on the order spike. "Six-thirty-three Kenmore."

Peter Kidd thanked him and left.

A number of telephone poles later, he came to the corner of Sixth and Kenmore. The minute he turned that corner, he knew something was wrong. Nothing psychic about it—there was a crowd gathered in front of a brownstone house halfway down the block. A uniformed policeman at the bottom of the steps was keeping the crowd back. A police ambulance and other cars were at the curb in front.

Peter Kidd lengthened his stride until he reached the edge of the crowd. By that time he could see that the building was numbered six-thirty-three. A stretcher was being carried through the door. The body on the stretcher—and the fact that the blanket was pulled over the face showed that it was a dead body—was that of a short, pudgy person.

The beginning of a shiver started down the back of Peter Kidd's neck. But it was a coincidence, of course. It had to be, he told himself, even if the dead man *was* Robert Asbury.

A dapper man with a baby face and cold eyes was running down the steps and pushing his way out through the crowd. Kidd recognized him as Wesley Powell of the *Tribune*. He reached for Powell's arm. "What happened in there?"

Powell didn't stop. He said, "Hi, Kidd. Drug store—phone!"

He hurried on, but Peter Kidd turned and fell in step with him. He repeated his question.

"Guy named Asbury was shot. Dead."

"Who was it?"

"Dunno. Cops got description from landlady, though. Guy was waiting for him in his room when he came home less'n hour ago. Musta burned him down, lanmed quick. Landlady found corpse. Heard other guy leave and went up to ask Asbury about job—guy was supposed to see him about a job. Asbury an actor, Robert Asbury. Know him?"

"Met him once," Kidd said. "Anything about a dog?"

Powell walked faster. "What you mean,"

he said sharply, "anything about a dog?"

"Uh—did Asbury have a dog?"

"Hell, no. You can't keep a dog in a rooming house. Nothing was said about a dog. Damn it, where's a store or a tavern or any place with a phone in it?"

Kidd said, "I believe I remember a tavern just around the next corner."

"Good." Powell looked back, before turning the corner, to see if the police cars were still there, and then walked even faster. He dived into the tavern and Kidd followed him.

Powell said, "Two beers," and hurried to the telephone on the wall.

Peter Kidd listened closely while the reporter gave the story to a rewrite man. He learned nothing new of any importance. The landlady's name was Mrs. Belle Drake. The place was a theatrical boarding house. Asbury had been 'at liberty' for several months.

Powell came back to the bar. He said, "What was that about a dog?" He wasn't looking at Kidd; he was looking out into the street, over the low curtains in the window of the tavern.

Peter Kidd said, "Dog? Oh, this Asbury used to have a dog when I knew him. Just wondered if he still had it."

Powell shook his head. He said, "That guy across the street—is he following you or me?"

PETER KIDD looked out the window. A tall, thin man stood well back in a doorway. He didn't appear to be watching the tavern. Kidd said, "He's no acquaintance of mine. What makes you think he's following either of us?"

"He was standing in a doorway across the street from the house where the murder was. Noticed him when I came out of the door. Now he's in a doorway over there. Maybe he's just sightseeing. Where'd you get the pooch?"

Peter Kidd glanced down at the shaggy dog. "Man gave him to me," he said. "Rover, Mr. Powell. Powell, Rover."

"I don't believe it," Powell said. "No dog is actually named Rover any more."

"I know," Peter Kidd agreed solemnly, "but the man who named him didn't know. What about the fellow across the street?"

"We'll find out. We go out and head in opposite directions. I head downtown, you

head for the river. We'll see which one of us he follows."

When they left, Peter Kidd didn't look around behind him for two blocks. Then he stopped, cupping his hands to light a cigarette, and half turning as though to shield it from the wind.

The man wasn't across the street. Kidd turned a little farther and saw why the tall man wasn't across the street. He was directly behind, only a dozen steps away. He hadn't stopped when Kidd stopped. He kept coming.

As the match burned his fingers, Peter Kidd remembered that these two blocks had been between warehouses. There was no traffic, pedestrian or otherwise. He saw that the man had already unbuttoned his coat—which had a stain down one side of it. He was pulling a pistol out of his belt.

The pistol had a long silencer on it, obviously the reason why he'd carried it that way instead of in a holster or in a pocket. The pistol was already half out of the belt.

Kidd did the only thing that occurred to him. He let go of the leash and said, "Sic him, Rover!"

The shaggy dog bounded forward and jumped up just as the tall man pulled the trigger. The gun pinged dully but the shot went wild. Peter Kidd had himself set by then, and he jumped forward after the dog. A silenced gun, he knew, fires only one shot. Between him and the dog, they should be able . . .

Only it didn't work that way. The shaggy dog had bounded up indeed, but was now trying to lick the tall man's face. The tall man, his nerve apparently having departed with the single cartridge in his gun, gave the dog a push and took to his heels. Peter Kidd fell over the dog.

That was that. By the time Kidd untangled himself from dog and leash, the tall man was down an alley and out of sight.

Peter Kidd stood up. The dog was running in circles around him, barking joyously. It wanted to play some more. Peter Kidd recovered the loop end of the leash and spoke bitterly. The shaggy dog wagged its tail.

They'd walked several blocks before it occurred to Kidd that he didn't know where he was going. For that matter, he told himself, he didn't really know where he'd been. It had been such a beautifully simple matter,

to him anyway, before he'd left his office.

If the shaggy dog hadn't been the dog of a murdered man before, it was one now. Except for that bullet's having gone wild, his present custodian, one Peter Kidd, might be in a position to ask Mr. Aloysius Smith Robert Asbury just exactly what the devil it was all about.

It had been so beautifully simple, as a *hoax*. For a moment he tried to think that—but no, that was silly. The police department didn't go in for *hoaxes*. Asbury had really been murdered.

I am the dog of a murdered man . . . Escape his fate, Sir, if you can . . .

Had Asbury actually found such a note, and then been murdered? Had the man with the silenced gun been following Kidd because he'd recognized the dog? A nut, maybe, out to kill each successive possessor of the shaggy dog?

Had Asbury's entire story been true—except for the phony name he'd given—and had he given a wrong name and address only because he'd been afraid?

But how to answer that? . . . Of course. Ask Sid Wheeler. If Sid had originated the *hoax* and hired Asbury, then the murder was a coincidence—one hell of a whopping coincidence.

CHAPTER FOUR

Two Damn Shaggy

YES, the thing to do was head for Sid Wheeler's office. He knew that now, but they'd been walking in the wrong direction. He turned and started back, gradually lengthening his strides. A block later, it occurred to him it would be quicker to phone. At least to make certain Sid was in, not out collecting rents or something.

He stopped in the nearest drug store and phoned. The feminine voice said, "Mr. Wheeler isn't here. He was taken to the hospital an hour ago. This is his secretary speaking. If there is anything I can—"

"What's the matter with Sid?" he demanded. There was a slight hesitation and he went on: "This is Peter Kidd, Miss Ames. You know me. What's wrong?"

"He—he was shot. The police just left. They told me not to g—give out the story, but you're a detective and a friend of his, so I guess it's—"

"How badly was he hurt?"

"They—they say he'll get better, Mr. Kidd. The bullet went through his chest, but on the right side and didn't touch the heart. He's at Bethesda Hospital. You can find out more there than I can tell you. You won't be able to see him yet, though. He's still unconscious."

"How did it happen, Miss Ames?"

"A man I'd never seen before said he wanted to see Mr. Wheeler on business and I sent him into the inner office. Mr. Wheeler was talking on the phone to someone who'd just called. . . . What was that, Mr. Kidd?"

Peter Kidd didn't care to repeat it. He said, "Never mind. Go on."

"He was in there only a few seconds and came out and left, fast. I couldn't figure out why he'd changed his mind so quick, and after he left, I looked in and—well, I thought Mr. Wheeler was dead. I guess the man thought so too. That is, if he meant to kill Mr. Wheeler, he could have easily—uh—"

"A silenced gun?"

"The police said it must have been, when I told them I hadn't heard the shot."

"What did the man look like?"

"Tall and thin, with a kind of sharp face. He had a light suit on. There was a slight stain of some kind, I think, on the front of the coat."

"Miss Ames," said Peter Kidd, "did Sid Wheeler buy or find a dog recently?"

"Why, yes, this morning. A big, white shaggy one. He came in at eight o'clock and had the dog with him on a leash. He said he'd bought it. He said it was to play a joke on somebody."

"What happened next—about the dog?" Kidd asked.

"He turned it over to a man who had an appointment with him at eight-thirty. A fat, funny-looking little man. He didn't give his name. But he must have been in on the joke, whatever it was, because they were chuckling together when Mr. Wheeler walked to the door with him."

"You don't know where he bought the dog? Anything more about it?"

"No, Mr. Kidd. He just said he bought it. And that it was for a joke."

Looking dazed, Peter Kidd hung up the receiver.

Sid Wheeler, shot.

Outside the booth, the big shaggy dog stood up on its hind legs and pawed at the glass. Kidd stared at it. Sid Wheeler had bought a dog. Sid Wheeler had been shot with intent to kill. Sid had given the dog to actor Asbury. Asbury had been murdered. Asbury had given the dog to him, Peter Kidd. And less than half an hour ago, an attempt had been made on his life.

The dog of a murdered man.

Well, there wasn't any question now about telling the police. Sid might have started this as a hoax, but a wheel had come off somewhere, and suddenly. He'd phone the police right here and now.

He dropped the nickel and then—on a sudden hunch—gave his own office number instead of that of headquarters. When the blonde's voice answered, he started talking fast.

"Peter Kidd, Miss Latham. I want you to close the office at once and go home. Right away, but be sure you're not followed. If anyone seems to be following you, go to the police. Stay on busy streets meanwhile. Watch out particularly for a tall, thin man who has a stain on the front of his coat. Got that?"

"Yes, but—but the police are here, Mr. Kidd. There's a Lieutenant West of Homicide here now. He just came into the office asking for you. Do you still want me to—"

Kidd sighed with relief. "No, it's all right then. Tell him to wait. I'm only a few blocks away and I'll come there at once."

He dropped another coin and called Bethesda Hospital. Sid Wheeler was in serious, but not critical, condition. He was still unconscious and wouldn't be able to have visitors for at least twenty-four hours.

He walked back to the Wheeler Building, slowly. The first faint glimmering of an idea was coming. But there were still a great many things that didn't make any sense at all. . . .

"Lieutenant West, Mr. Kidd," said the blonde.

The big man nodded. "About a Robert Asbury, who was killed this morning. You knew him?"

"Not before this morning," Kidd told him. "He came here—ostensibly—to offer me a case. The circumstances were very peculiar."

"We found your name and the address

of this office on a slip of paper in his pocket," said West. "It wasn't in his handwriting. Was it yours?"

"Probably it's Sidney Wheeler's handwriting, Lieutenant. Sid sent him here, I have cause to believe. And you know that an attempt was made to kill Wheeler this morning?"

"The devil! Had a report on that, but we hadn't connected it with the Asbury murder as yet."

"And there was another murder attempt," said Kidd. "Upon me. That was why I phoned. Perhaps I'd better tell you the whole story from the beginning."

The lieutenant's eyes widened as he listened. From time to time he turned to look at the dog.

"And you say," he said, when Kidd had finished, "that you have the money in an envelope in your pocket? May I see it?"

PETER KIDD handed over the envelope. West glanced inside it and then put it in his pocket. "Better take this along," he said. "Give you a receipt if you want, but you've got a witness." He glanced at the blonde.

"Give it to Wheeler," Kidd told him. "Unless . . . Maybe you've got the same idea I have. You must have, or you wouldn't have wanted the money."

"What idea's that?"

Peter Kidd frowned thoughtfully. "Might not have anything to do with all this at all. Today the dog was in the hands of three persons—Wheeler, Asbury and myself. An attempt was made to kill each of us—successfully, I am glad to say, in only one case out of the three. But the dog was merely the—ah—*deus ex machina* of a hoax that didn't come off, or else came off too well. There's something else involved—the money."

"What are you getting at, Mr. Kidd?"

"Just this—the money was the object of the crimes, not the dog. That money was in the hands of Wheeler, Asbury and myself, just as much as the dog. The killer's been trying to get that money back."

"Back? How do you mean, back? I don't get what you're driving at, Mr. Kidd."

"Not because it's a hundred dollars. Because it isn't."

"You mean you think it's counterfeit?

We can check that easy enough, but what makes you think so?"

"The fact," said Peter Kidd, "that I can think of no other motive at all. No reasonable one, I mean. But postulate, for the sake of argument, that the money is counterfeit. That would, or could, explain everything. Suppose one of Sid Wheeler's tenants is a counterfeiter."

West frowned. "All right, suppose it."

"Sid could have picked up the rent on his way to his office this morning. That's how he makes most of his collections. Say the rent is a hundred dollars. Might have been slightly more or less—but by mistake, sheer mistake, he gets paid in counterfeit money instead of genuine."

"No counterfeiter, it is obvious, would ever dare give out his own product in such a manner that it could be directly traced back to him. It's—uh—"

"Shoved," said West. "I know how they work."

"But as it happened, Sid wasn't banking the money. He needed a hundred to give to Asbury along with the dog. And—"

He broke off abruptly and his eyes got wider. "Lord," he said, "it's obvious!"

"What's obvious?" West growled.

"Everything. It all spells *Harrison*."

"Huh?"

"Harrison, the job printer on the floor below this. He's the only printer among Wheeler's tenants, to begin with. And Asbury stopped in there this morning, on his way *here*. Asbury paid him for some cards out of a ten-dollar bill he got from Wheeler! Harrison saw the other tens in Asbury's wallet when he opened it, and knew that Asbury had the money he'd given Wheeler for the rent."

"So he sends his torpedo—the tall thin man—to see Asbury, and the torpedo kills Asbury and then finds the money is gone—he's given it to me. So he goes and kills Sid Wheeler—or thinks he does—so the money can't be traced back to him from wherever Asbury spent it."

"And then," Peter Kidd grinned wryly, "I put myself on the spot by dropping into Harrison's office to get Asbury's address, and explaining to him what it's all about, letting him know I have the money and know Asbury got it from Wheeler. I even tell him where I'm going—to Asbury's. So

the torpedo waits for me there. It fits like a glove. Wait, I've got something that proves it even better! This—"

As he spoke he was bending over and opening the second drawer of his desk. His hand went into it and came out with a short-barreled police positive.

"You will please raise your hands," he said, hardly changing his voice. "And Miss Latham, you will please phone for the police. . . ."

* * *

"But how," demanded the blonde, when the police had left, "did you guess that that man West wasn't a *real* detective?"

"I didn't," said Peter Kidd, "until I was explaining things to him, and to myself at the same time. Then it occurred to me that the counterfeiting gang wouldn't simply drop the whole thing because they'd missed me once, and—well, as it happens, I was right. If he'd been a real detective, I'd have been making a fool out of myself, of course; but if he wasn't, I'd have been making a corpse out of myself, and that would be worse."

"And me, too," said the blonde. She shivered a little. "He'd have had to kill both of us!"

Peter Kidd nodded gravely. "I think the police will find that Harrison is the printer for the gang and the tall thin fellow is just a hood. The man who came here, I'd judge, was the real entrepreneur."

"The what?"

"The manager of the business. From the Old French *entreprendre*, to undertake, which comes from the Latin *inter plus pren*—"

"You mean the big-shot," said the blonde. She was opening a brand new ledger. "Our first case. Credit entry—one hundred dollars counterfeit. Debit—given to police, one hundred dollars counterfeit. And—oh, yes, one shaggy dog. Is that a debit or a credit entry?"

"Debit," said Peter Kidd.

The blonde wrote, and then looked up. "How about the credit entry to balance it off? What'll I put in the credit column?"

Peter Kidd looked at the dog, and grinned. He said, "Just write in 'Not so damn shaggy!'"

THE END



Yesterday a famous model, today a battered corpse. For Mary didn't know it was three sweethearts and out—on the cold morgue slab!

THREE for the KILL

By JOSEPH V. HICKEY

I LOOKED at the body sprawled on the floor. "So that's Mary Collins," I said.

Detective-Sergeant Ryan, kneeling beside the body, looked up and nodded. "Hard to believe, isn't it, Hal? Somebody must have hated her. The strangling would have been enough, but her face has been

beaten until she looks—well, you can see for yourself." He shook his head slowly. "Yesterday the most sought-after model in town, today a battered corpse."

Ryan rose and walked about the room. Hands in pockets. He turned slowly, taking in everything, his brow wrinkled in

thought. Then he beckoned to the apartment-house manager hovering nervously in the foyer.

Ryan spoke briefly to the man, who shook his head vehemently.

"I've spoken to the doorman and other members of my staff," the manager said. "They all told me that no one had been in Miss Collins' apartment all day yesterday except the painters. Shortly after they left, Miss Collins came home. That was about seven o'clock. Around eight o'clock this morning one of our maids entered the apartment to do the usual cleaning. She called me on the house phone. She was so hysterical I couldn't understand her, so I came right up and found—" He shuddered slightly and nodded his head toward the body.

"I don't like to admit the possibility, Sergeant," he went on. "Particularly in my own apartment house. But if someone knew his way around here, it might not have been too difficult for him to come through the service entrance and go up the rear stairs unobserved."

He paused, eyeing the sergeant. Ryan waved a hand in dismissal. "Thanks, Mr. Johnson. If I need you again, I'll get in touch."

He turned and spoke to a plainclothesman. "I'm through here, Murphy. Tell the boys to wrap it up. And keep a man here until I send a relief."

Ryan took me by the arm. "See me at headquarters about ten tomorrow morning, Hal. The boys and I have some routine work to do on this case. There are three men we'll have to pick up. From what I've learned so far, one of them might very well be the killer. If I'm wrong, the case will be tough; if I'm right, it will be an easy one to figure."

He tapped my chest for emphasis. "There is no indication of robbery or attempted robbery, and there's no evidence of a maniac. Yet violence and death occurred here. To me that means the killer is someone she knew real well—too well."

The next day, sitting beside Ryan's desk in police headquarters, I thought about that remark, "an easy one to figure." I ran over the facts again: Mary Collins, famous cover girl, strangled to death in her own apartment last Saturday night between eight and nine o'clock. No visitors seen entering or leaving, nothing stolen. I shook my head

slowly and voiced my thoughts. "You still think it's an easy one to figure? It doesn't look that simple to me."

Ryan grinned. "That's because you're a writer, Hal. You fellows are always looking for complications; you like to muddy up the water so no one can get a clear look through it and see what's on the bottom. Now me—I figure things out like a cop. I take a series of fact and see where they lead."

He lit a cigar and puffed for a moment, then went on, "Forget the storybook detectives, Hal. Look at it this way: the killer has to be a man, connected in some way with the Collins girl. No woman did this job; the beating Mary Collins got could not have been handed out by a woman. So we pick up the men usually associated with her."

"Three were what you might term steady callers. One of these just arrived Saturday night on the seven o'clock plane from Paris. We learned that he had been in France on a six-month's visit. That almost lets him out, but we summoned him anyway. We can't overlook anyone, or anything. Those three men are outside now. I'm going to talk to each in turn, and when I'm through, I'll be surprised if you and I can't go on that fishing trip we've planned."

He spoke to a uniformed man. "Bring in Arnold Catlett."

Ryan wasted little time on the young man who entered. "Where were you Saturday night between eight and nine o'clock?"

Catlett answered after a moment's thought, "At the Sphinx Club, with my father."

A plainclothesman nodded confirmation to Ryan.

Then the sergeant asked a series of apparently irrelevant questions about the apartment and its furnishings. At one point I was about to speak when his hand pressed down on my arm, cautioning me to keep silent.

Catlett answered every question readily and Ryan, satisfied, told the officers to release him.

Carl Thompson, sandy-haired, powerfully built, was brought in next and seated before Ryan.

I leaned forward. This man, soft-spoken, expensively tailored, still conveyed to me a

feeling of primitive force so strong that instinctively I knew he could kill if he felt it necessary.

The sergeant's first question was the same as it had been in Catlett's case. Thompson answered slowly, almost indifferently, "I was walking in Central Park."

"Anyone with you?" asked Ryan. "Can you prove it?"

Thompson shook his head.

Ryan questioned him closely about the apartment. Thompson moved in irritation. "I haven't been there for the past week, Sergeant, but I've been there often enough before that. I can just about recall grayish walls, maroon furniture, maybe maroon drapes. I'm not too sure. I didn't go there to see the furniture."

I was surprised to find almost a note of sadness in his last remark.

Ryan studied his notes, looked up. "You can go for now, Thompson, but don't attempt to leave the city until I get in touch with you."

Thompson nodded shortly and left the office. Ryan motioned to a plainclothesman who immediately slipped out after Thompson.

AMOS DARROW, the third man, was brought in and seated before Ryan. He looked like an ad out of *Town and Country*: graying temples, lean, chiseled features, impeccable grooming.

"At the time you mention, Mr. Ryan, I was either at La Guardia airport, or on my way to the hotel in a taxicab. I got in at seven o'clock, as you know, and there was some delay with my baggage."

Ryan nodded absently. Then he started his interminable questions about the apartment.

"Really, Sergeant," said Darrow, showing uneasiness for the first time, "I haven't been to that apartment for the past six months. I admit that I did squire the Collins girl about a few times. Like others, I was attracted by her undoubted loveliness, but it takes more than beauty to hold a man like me. I admire good taste in a woman almost as much as I admire her charm."

"Good taste?" queried Ryan; his eyes narrowed slightly.

"Yes," answered Darrow. He went on confidently, "Why, I actually severed my

relationship with Miss Collins just before I left for Paris; she wasn't my type. Imagine using maroon furniture and drapes in a room with those horrible, dark-green walls." His thin lips curled in distaste.

"You'd better get a lawyer, Darrow," Ryan said abruptly. "I'm going to book you for murder."

Darrow's mouth formed a trembling oval; he looked stricken.

"Now this is what really happened," Ryan went on. "Someone tipped you off

(Continued on page 111)



HER WAYS ARE DEATH

By Jack Mann

She was the daughter of the ancient, dark Valkyrs, and he the clever magician who unraveled the murderous depths of the abnormal mind. . . . One step beyond the boundaries of the supernatural world which separated them and one must forever destroy the other. Which would survive, the alluring, lovely witch, or the man who was sent to break her spell?

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MYSTERIES

THE EXPENDABLE

Mel Blaine really bled when his gorgeous ex-wife's boyfriend got jugged for murder. Because Mel had a hot tip that he himself, the innocent bystander, was due to get framed and hung!



CHAPTER ONE

If the Frame Fits . . .

IT WASN'T a fight. It wasn't even a reasonable facsimile. He just walked up to the bar and hit me. I went down and stayed down. He bent over me, said something in an angry voice and walked away. I didn't understand a word of it. I was too groggy, and he had an accent you could have spread on pumpernickel. To

Exciting

Detective

Novelette

Helene's eyes flew wide.



this day I don't know what he looked like, except at the minute I had the impression that he was eight feet tall and had a fist the size of a policeman's foot.

A pair of slim, good-looking legs waded up through the surf around me, and a tiny, tinkling voice asked anxiously, "Are you hurt, Mel?"

I tried to say, "Hell no, I'm fine, just fine," but nothing came out. Two pairs of arms hoisted me to my feet, and I hung between them like a deflated balloon. A masculine voice said in awe, "What a slap in the chops that was! I thought his head was coming right off. His neck musta stretched six inches!" Something hard clicked against my teeth and the tinkling voice said, "Here, drink this, Mel."

I opened my mouth and something liquid washed down my throat and over my chin. It had no flavor at all, but presently a warm spot of strength grew in my stomach, and muscles crawled back into my arms and legs. The fog rolled back, the sun came out, and there was Helene, my lovely ex-wife, holding a shot-glass and looking worriedly into my face.

I gave her a foolish grin. I mumbled, "Y'oughta watch out. Don't know y'own strength."

She said crisply to the man on my right—it was the barkeep—"He'll be all right. Just prop him up at the bar and he'll feel natural."

I muttered, "All except my jaw. That feels twice as natural."

Between them, they hoisted me on a bar stool, and the barkeep hurried around back and poured something potent in a tall glass and set it before me. Helene wasn't feeling as pert as she sounded, for she hovered at my elbow and fussed until I picked up the glass with both hands and took a messy swallow.

I leered at her and said, "You can be the first to carve your initials in my plaster cast."

She bit her lip, and her hands clenched. She said bitterly, "Why do you always have to come up with a wisecrack, Mel?"

I winked. It was an effort. "I'm British," I said. "I'm keeping a stiff upper lip. In fact, my whole face is stiff." I touched it gingerly. "Can I buy you a drink?" I said hopefully.

She looked at me and her brows went

down in a straight, uncompromising line, but she climbed on the stool beside me. "I'll buy my own, thanks," she said stiffly.

I raised a finger to the barkeep. "For the lady," I said, "a double Mickey Finn with just a touch of lemon."

"A double martini, please. I want to talk to you, Mel."

"No, you don't. You want to talk *at* me. But first I want to ask you a question. Why did you have your friend take a poke at me?"

"He wasn't a friend!"

"Oh, come now, Helene. I know you better than that. You wouldn't have a total stranger sock me. You have better manners. But the question is still—why?"

"It was your own fault," she said defensively. "You were following me around again. But believe me, Mel, I'm sorry he hit you. I didn't think he'd do that. I didn't tell him to. I just saw you sitting here at the bar and I said, 'Oh damn, there's that hand-dog ex of mine airedaling around after me again.' He said he'd take care of that. I didn't think he'd just walk up and hit you. I thought he'd say something to you."

"He did," I said. "He said something to me. Pay no attention to that poke in the snout. That was just to put me in a receptive mood. But, darling, promise me one thing. The next time you have somebody do you a favor—have him do it on somebody else. . . . You're even lovelier than I remembered you, Helene."

"That's enough of that, Mel!"

"I love you, Helene."

"That's over now. It's finished. And you've got to stop following me wherever I go. I don't like it and . . . Frank doesn't like it."

I said hollowly, "Frank? Is this something new? Where did you get a Frank?"

"Frank Delmar. We're going to be married."

I gaped at her. I said, unbelievably, "Not Frank Delmar, the guy who runs the Chinese Garden Club on the Palisades?"

"That's one of his interests," she said primly. "I met him at the horse show in Long Island."

"I'll bet you did! He must have gone crazy trying to fix all those horses. I'll bet it broke his heart."

She said, too quietly, "Stop it, Mel."

I stammered on, "But he's a crook, Helene. That Chinese Garden Club of his is a gambling house. It's crooked enough to rate a Congressional investigation. He's a crooked sports promoter. He runs a crooked bookie's syndicate. Good Lord, Helene, he's the world's worst revolving wolf, he's—"

She sprang off her stool. Her hand licked out and caught me on the side of the chin. She stood for a moment, her eyes blazing, then turned and walked toward the door, her heels clicking angrily. I just sat and stared stupidly, long after the doorway was empty.

The bartender said sadly, "You ought to have your picture taken while you still have a chin. You're not going to have it much longer at the rate you're going." I had knocked my glass over, and he picked it up and gave me a refill. "On the house," he said. Then sympathetically, "Your wife?"

"My ex. She says she's going to marry Frank Delmar," I said dully.

He whistled and pushed out his underlip. "She keeps pretty fancy company, don't she? What do you know about that, now!" He leaned forward confidentially. "Y'know, I'd of put money on it that you were the high card in her hand. You should have heard her tell off that guy who put the slug on you."

"That guy! I'd like to meet him again."

"No you wouldn't," he said earnestly.

"Believe me, friend, you don't want to meet him again—ever." His voice dropped a notch. "That was Sonny Sundstrom, the wrestler."

"He should stick to wrestling," I said sourly. "I'll report him to the Prizefighters' Union." I drained my glass. "Fill it up."

"Ain't you going a little strong?" he asked mildly.

"Nossir. Not yet. I don't go strong until around midnight. Then I have two heads and they both drink. Make it a triple this time. . . ."

WAKING up the next morning was a pocket cataclysm, but after a shower, a shave and a breakfast of tomato, orange, grapefruit and pineapple juice, I felt well enough to face the world without a wheelchair.

I finished dressing with one of those clip-on bow ties because the ordinary kind felt like a noose around my neck, and went down to the office—the Mel Blaine Advertising Agency. In addition to the twelve staff artists I had working for me, I was also running a school of advertising and fashion art which was rated among the top ten in the state.

Quite a hive of industry.

I wasn't in the mood for a hive of industry this morning. I was still sick about Helene and Delmar. My secretary looked up from her typing as I walked in and I said grumpily, "Morning," and started for my office.

She chuckled, "Been on the brew, stew?" She'd been with me since the beginning, and sometimes she took a bit of latitude. She was about forty-five, with a nice, big, motherly shape and graying hair. I called her Calamity Jane. She knew more about the business than any of us, and believe me, whenever she thought anything was *right* we all danced around with the daisy chain.

"That ex-cellmate of yours called," she said.

That stopped me in the doorway. I said, "Helene?" I didn't turn because I didn't want her to see my face. I couldn't even think of Helene anymore without it showing naked in my face. "Call her back," I said in a muffled voice. "I'll take it in the office."

She jeered, "Don't be dumb, chum."

"Call her back!" I snapped. "And for Pete's sake, no wisecracks!" That hit me too, a little. That had been Helene's complaint—my wisecracks. It's a habit you get into, like clearing your throat unnecessarily or pulling your ear or digging people in the ribs with your thumb to emphasize a joke. Annoying.

She made an exasperated noise, and I went into the office. I didn't even take off my hat and topcoat, but went straight to the desk and sat fidgeting on the edge of it, waiting for the buzz that would tell me I was through to Helene.

When it came, I snatched up the phone and said eagerly, "Hello, darling. This is Mel. Calmity said you called."

There was a slight pause and she said, "Oh, it's you," in that flat, chilling voice only women seem to have.

I tried to ride over it. "You're up before noon," I said brightly. "What happened? Did the furniture company repossess your bed?" I was wisecracking again. I couldn't help it.

When her voice came, it sounded as if she were dragging it uphill at the end of a fifty-foot rope. "Mel," she said heavily, "I think I'm going to kill you."

I laughed feebly. She didn't sound as if she were joking, but maybe that would come later. "You can't do it today, darling," I said. "It's the thirteenth and that's unlucky. Can you make it for the fourteenth?"

She waited until I finished, then went on in the same relentless voice, "I love Frank Delmar. You're not going to mess it up, Mel. I won't let you."

"I'm sorry about what I said yesterday, darling," I said swiftly. "I just shot off my fat mouth and I apologize. I was still dizzy from that pasting your wrestler friend gave me. Let me tell you a funny thing . . ."

I stopped and looked, bewildered, into the phone. It was dead. She had hung up. There wasn't any joke. She had said what she wanted to say and there wasn't any more.

I dropped the phone back into its cradle and mechanically reached for a cigarette. The door opened. It was Calamity. A lopsided grin ran up her mouth and deep into her cheek. She'd been listening in.

I said quickly, "Now I know she loves me, Calam. She wants to kill me. That's a sure sign, isn't it?"

"That so?" Then dryly, "Everybody in town seems to know she's marrying that louse Frank Delmar except you."

"She told me last night."

Calamity shrugged. "Did you see the morning paper?"

"No, and I don't want to. What's it got to interest me on a day like today?"

"Take a look."

She crossed the office and spread the paper on the desk before me. Delmar's face looked up from a two-column cut, and over it was a four column forty-eight point Bodoni bold head:

**WRESTLER SLAIN;
GAMBLER HELD**

**Frank Delmar
Denies Guilt;
Claims Frame**

I SAID, "Wow!" and my eyes ran down into the body of the story. "Sonny Sundstrom! That's the guy who clipped me yesterday. Ha! Delmar was his manager. That explains it."

Calamity said stolidly, "That so? Read it."

I shot her a puzzled glance, and she waved her hand at the paper. "Read it," she said woodenly.

I didn't need much urging, but her attitude seemed a little funny. I shrugged and turned back to read the item in the newspaper.

It was the bulldog edition, and just the bare bones of the story was there. A chambermaid, named Emma something or other, had gone into Delmar's suite in the apartment-hotel he owned and turned up what she thought were two bodies. She went screaming for the police. Sundstrom was dead with four bullets in him, but Delmar was only unconscious from a clip behind the ear. The gun from which the bullets had been fired was lying on the rug between them. There were no fingerprints on the gun.

In a statement issued to the press through his attorney, Leo X. O'Connor, Delmar said that as he walked into his suite at 5 a. m., he was struck on the head by a man who leaped at him from behind the opened door.

"He was about six feet tall and had broad shoulders," Delmar alleged. "I had never seen him before, but I feel sure I can identify him, for the light of the hotel sign outside the window shone across his face as he attacked me."

The police were making the usual gestures. The tone of the story said they were skeptical.

I looked up at Calamity and said, "So what? He was Sundstrom's manager. Maybe he was double-crossing the guy; maybe they got in an argument and Sundstrom tried to hang one on him. Sundstrom's an eager beaver that way, believe me. Delmar shot him. That mysterious attacker never existed, Delmar invented him for a cover-up."

She said grimly, "Don't be a droop. Ransack that alleged mind of yours and see if you can find any six-foot, broad-shouldered attackers anywhere among your acquaintances."

I said, "Huh?"

"One picture is worth a thousand words. C'mere!" She took my wrist and jerked me off the desk. She led me across the office and stood me before the mirror over a Chippendale console table I had once bought when I liked Chippendale.

"Figure it out for yourself. You're six feet high. Your shoulders are probably padded, but they look broad. Your wife is engaged to Delmar, and now she wants to shoot you. I'm saying it in English so you can understand it? Can you add?"

I said faintly, "Why don't you lay off the goof butts?" But I stared into the mirror, and the face that stared back at me looked white and scared. "Hell!" I roared, turning on her. "What are you trying to do, give me the creeping meemees? You're out of your mind!" I took out a cigarette, found a match in my vest pocket and fumbled a light for myself.

"Be reasonable," I said. "Look at this thing logically and calmly. . . ."

She said, "Why not? But in the meantime, if you'd put the matches back in your vest pocket and take the lighted cigarette out, you'd be a lot happier. Hell, Mel, this isn't a joke, damn it! They're rigging you for a hot squat."

I said uneasily, "Talk-talk-talk-talk. . . ."

"Okay," she said, tossing up her hands. "I've had my say; now it's your turn. Shoot, snoot."

"Cut it out, Calam, will you?"

"Okay. What are you going to do?"

"Go down to police headquarters and have a talk with Delmar. I'll straighten that out!"

"That's fine," she said. "That's just dandy. Don't forget to take your toothbrush. They won't even bother opening the door when they throw you in the jug. They'll push you through the bars like ham-burger."

"I had nothing to do with it," I said stubbornly.

"Neither did I, but I'm keeping it to myself."

"And I don't want Helene thinking I did."

"Don't worry about Helene. She couldn't hit the side of Sidney Greenstreet with a shotgun." She patted my arm and gave it a friendly squeeze. "Okay, Mel," she said quietly. "It's your bundle. But

for heaven's sake, keep away from headquarters."

There was sense in that, and I nodded. "All I'm going to do is find out where I was last night."

She groaned, "Omigod, I thought you knew!"

CHAPTER TWO

Melancholy Baby

CHARLEY'S BAR AND GRILL was on Market Street, Corned Beef and Cabbage a Specialty. Homey. That was my first stop. I didn't expect the same barkeep to be on duty, but he was. He turned out to be Charley, himself.

I hunched on a stool and ordered a beer, and when he brought it I said, "Remember me? I was the guy that got slapped down by Sonny Sundstrom."

He leaned on his bar towel and peered at me. "Oh, yeah," he said. "Your chin looks a little different today. Black and blue. You were in here with a dame, your ex-wife, you said. I remember now. Say, she was in here a little while ago asking about you."

I gripped the edge of my stool. I tried to keep my voice casual. "Asking about me? What'd she say?"

"Nothing much. Like, what'd you say after she left, and so forth."

"What'd you tell her?"

He gave me a friendly grin. "I gave you the build-up, boy. I said you were nuts about her, and that the idea of her marrying Delmar had you all busted out at the seams. Which was about the truth, when you come to think of it. That's just about what you did say, plus your personal opinion of Delmar, which I didn't repeat on account of I got better sense. She asked me about that."

I stopped breathing. "You said?"

"Nothing much. Just to make sense, I said you didn't think much of him, but she already knew that because you told her." He grinned.

I moved my mouth and hoped it looked like a grin. "What else did she ask?"

He was getting a little impatient now. Other customers were drifting in, and he wanted to get to them.

"Hell," he said, starting to sidle away,

"I don't remember exactly. She asked where you went from here, and I told her you wanted to go out and hear some piano player because he made you sad. Why don't you ask her yourself? She probably remembers it better than I do."

I'll bet she does, I thought as he moved off. I'll bet every word is chiseled on her mind like an epitaph on a tombstone.

My epitaph.

I sat there, choking my beer with both hands, trying to remember all the pianists who made me sad. They all did, it seemed to me. They were all imitating somebody else. I knew damn well I hadn't gone to New York to hear one of the really top boys, and most of the rest weren't worth a wooden nickel.

It came out of the blue, just like that. Eddie Woods.

I liked Eddie Woods. He had a nice, easy, melancholy style, solid in the bass and not too fancy in the right hand, the way most of them are. Arpeggios! He's on the way up. If you go in for records, pick up his *Mood Indigo*, the only rubber he's cut so far. In another few years, it'll be a collector's item.

I scooped up my change and walked out without even touching my beer. Finding where Eddie Woods was playing was child's play—which made it especially easy for me, because I was beginning to feel like a babe in the woods in the worst sense. I picked up a paper and learned from the amusement page that he was featured in a place called the Blue Door on Clinton Avenue.

That part of it was easy. It stopped being so easy when I found the place closed. It had a blue door, all right—a pretty crummy-looking blue door, and even crummier because it was locked. I banged on it until even the street cleaner stopped to look at me, and street cleaners never stop for anything.

I peered through the slitted slats of the venetian blinds that hung down the door. Inside was a large oval bar with the stools standing upside down on it. In the center of the oval was a small white piano on a platform. I began to remember it now. I had sat at the bar just a little behind the piano to Eddie Woods' left, so I could watch his hands while he played. I remember talking to him. He had a kind of thick

voice. Not husky, but thick, as if he were talking through a mouthful of oatmeal. I remembered requesting *Melancholy Baby* and *I Got a Right to Sing the Blues*, Ethel Waters' old number.

If I had talked to anyone there, it would have been to Eddie Woods. In a hot spot like that, the barkeeps would have been too busy with the trade to exchange the weather or the time of day with anybody except the bar creeps who came every night. Eddie Woods.

I HAD an uneasy feeling, that I couldn't explain, about looking up Eddie Woods, but it had to be done. If I had gone to hear Eddie Woods the night before, I would have stayed right through until closing, and that would account for just that much more of my time. And if I had talked to him, he would remember it. I get awfully talkative when I'm frisky with whiskey. There I go, damn it! That's Calamity's influence. But what I mean is, he'd *know* if I had talked to him. And after closing, I probably would have invited him down to Jimmie the Oysterman's down on River Street for clams. I always did.

Take my word for it—when things break too easy, watch out! Things broke too easy for me. Finding Eddie Woods wasn't even a problem. I simply called the paper and got the amusement page editor—a guy named Alan Brandywine—and asked him where Eddie Woods was bedding down. Alan knew everything.

"Eddie Woods?" he said. "What do you want with that piano plumber? He's staying at the Hotel Evans. But if you're after his autograph, he can't write. And if you ask me, he can't read either, and I mean music."

"I love him," I said. "He makes me glad I'm not a piano."

"If you want to hear a pianist . . ."

"I don't. All I want to do is tear a herring with this guy. How about lunch one of these days?"

"Every time you ask me to lunch," he said resignedly, "you try to sell me a bill of goods. Who are you press-agenting now?"

"Forget that episode. It was only an idea and it didn't work. I'm staying with straight advertising and the hell with publicity."

"Fine. Thursday, and you pay for the lunch."

"That's blackmail, but okay. See you at Jimmie the Oysterman's."

"Shrimps!" he groaned.

The Hotel Evans was a new glazed-tile-and-steel monolith up near the courthouse in the heart of the city, very convenient when you're up for trial. And don't think the characters who stayed there had much else on their minds. It was the acknowledged hangout.

When I went to the desk and asked for Eddie Woods, the desk clerk looked surprised that I hadn't flashed a badge in the palm of my hand.

The tone of his voice told me that I had lost some of his respect. "Mr. Woods? I'll see if he's in, sir."

He turned to the phone. His hair looked like groomed licorice. But when he turned back, his eyes had a funny, oblique look and there was a little ragged edge to his voice, as if the professional suavity had only been plated on and it was beginning to peel.

"Mr. Woods is in room ten-ten," he said, and watched me cross the lobby. He was still watching when I entered the elevator.

In the elevator was a small bulletin board, announcing certain activities in the hotel—*Swoop McGoo and his Raggedy Andys playing Nately in the Grotto Room*—but prominently displayed was Eddie Woods' name. On Friday, June 6, it said, Eddie Woods would present a unique recital in Mosque Hall entitled *The History of Jazz*, with an interpolated commentary by Cass Duluth, music critic of the *Post*, tickets .75, 1.00, 1.50 and 2.00.

That was strictly to whistle!

I looked again to make sure it said Mosque Hall. It did.

Mosque Hall has a seating capacity of five thousand, and unless Eddie Woods had gotten himself underwritten, he'd be in hock for the rest of his life just paying the rental, because nobody without an organization was going to sell enough tickets to fill Mosque Hall.

As I walked down the corridor I could hear the thunder of a full-throated piano beating out the honkatonk rhythms of George Gershwin's *American in Paris*. The piano stopped when I pushed the buzzer beside the door.

Eddie Woods was big—bigger than I re-

membered him hunched over that piano in the Blue Door. He had big, square hands, twice as thick as mine, and hard with muscle. He had on a sweat shirt, a pair of sloppy corduroy slacks and bedroom slippers. His face was sullen and heavy, and the lines lifted scarcely at all when he smiled.

"Oh, it's you," he said. "*The Melancholy Baby* guy. I wondered what the hell Mel Blaine looked like. Come in." He jerked his head and turned from the door. His invitation wasn't cordial or even friendly. It was off-hand and a little hard.

He shuffled over to the baby grand near the window and sat loosely on the stool. There was a glass of buttermilk on the floor beside the piano and he picked it up, sipped it and watched me over the rim of the glass.

I STOOD in the middle of the room, twirling my hat in my hands and wondering how to start without seeming a complete damn fool, when he asked derisively, "Did you ever get that bellyful of clams you were talking about?"

"Oh yes, sure," I said, "I got them all right." So that's where I had gone after the Blue Door—down to Jimmie the Oysterman's on River Street. I put out a feeler. "That was quite a conversation we had last night."

"If you want to call it that." He finished the buttermilk and put the glass back on the floor. His left hand strayed to the keyboard and wove an intricate pattern of triplets, but that must have been mechanical with him, for he lifted his head and looked at me. "Fact is," he said, his voice hardening, "after that little conversation, I can't figure what the hell you're doing here today."

I said feebly, "You can't?" I began to feel a little sick again. So I had shot my mouth off there, too. I wet my lips. "Sorry if I offended you," I apologized, "but I was feeling a little low. My wife . . ."

"Your ex-wife. Remember?"

I closed my eyes. "She was here?" My voice seemed to come from a long way off.

"Yeah. Quite a coincidence, eh?" His fingers ran through a series of jangling minor chords—edged, mocking music. "She didn't seem to like you much, friend. You're unpopular."

"What—what did she say?" I stammered.

"Well, let's see now." He made a pretense of trying to recall. He was enjoying watching me sweat. It came out in the unconscious lift he gave to his lefthand improvisations. He was one of those musicians who did all his thinking and feeling on the piano. "Oh yeah, she wanted some information." His left hand hammered a crashing chord. He leaned forward and snapped, "About Frankie Delmar—what you'd said about him. I told her, Blaine. I guess I'm just a sucker for a beautiful dame. And I'm a truthful guy. I told her you were going to see to it that Frankie wouldn't get within ten miles of an altar with her. Your exact words."

I stood before him, my shoulders slumped, and out of this desolation came marching the remembrance of my own words, slow-walking to funeral music, damning me with every beat.

I said incoherently, "I didn't mean—it was just the kind of thing you say when—I didn't mean—"

The piano stopped and he stood. "What didn't you mean, Blaine?" he asked. He looked genuinely curious, his head tilted a little to one side, his eyebrows arched.

"I didn't mean anything," I mumbled. "I didn't mean a thing. I was just talking. I think I'll run along. Thanks a lot." I turned to go.

He said, "Wait a minute, friend." Then, softly, "So you're the no-good rat who put the boots to Frankie Delmar!"

Too late I saw his right shoulder drop. I flung up my arm, but his hard, thick fist slid over it and caught me on the mouth. I went staggering and flailing back into the wall. I struck a chair with my out-flung hand, numbing my hand. He leaped forward and clipped me again just under the eye. I twisted and fell over my own legs. Lying on my side, I saw the bedroom door open behind him and a small, thin man in a plain suit slip into the room. I had enough sense left to lie still. He looked inquiringly at Woods, who stood beside me, breathing hard and shaking his right hand as if it hurt. He examined his knuckles, breathed on them and wrapped his left hand over them.

The thin man said nasally, "You're a damn fool. What did you do, break it?"

"Just skinned a little." He wriggled his fingers experimentally. "I've been wanting

to pin one on this guy ever since last night. I gave him fair warning. I told him then that Frankie was the guy who was putting up the dough for my recital, and if he opened his yap once more, I'd fill it full of ex-teeth. I didn't know then what was on his mind. See that he don't get up. I'm going to call the Lion and see what he wants done with him."

The thin man said, "Do that. He'll be interested." He crossed the room and stood beside me, his hands thrust into his jacket pockets, the thumbs hooked outside. Woods went into the bedroom, still rubbing his knuckles.

I looked at the little man's feet. He was balanced on his left leg, his right foot drawn back. A kicker, I thought. All the better. I waited till I heard Woods' voice on the phone, then lurched to my hands and knees. The foot swept forward in a vicious arc. I caught it on my shoulder, twisted, grabbed his ankle and pushed it straight up. He went over backwards.

I flung myself on him and clubbed him on both sides of the neck, then scrambled to my feet and darted for the door.

I was half way out when Woods yelled behind me, "Hey, wait a minute! Leo wants to see you. Hey, Blaine!"

I darted into the hall. I was at the head of the stairs when he reached the door. He roared with laughter.

"Go ahead, run!" he guffawed. "There's a cop on every corner and two in every prowl car. If you're smart, you'll go and see. . . ."

The rest was lost in the clatter of my feet down the stairs.

CHAPTER THREE

Mel Blaine, Gumshoe

THE desk clerk saw me go through the lobby. His jaw dropped, and after a petrified instant, he jumped for the phone. The word had gotten down that far already—Blaine is the rat who put the frame on Frankie Delmar. Get Blaine. I scurried through the revolving door, hesitated a moment and turned south, away from the Courthouse.

My face hurt. It shot splinters of pain into my eyes and into my brain and, worse, into what was left of my mind. If you've gone along for years being a plain, ordinary

citizen, you can't get flung into something like this without feeling that the solid world is disintegrating around you. I felt lost, trapped, hunted, beaten, all in one; and no matter where I looked, my eyes seemed to be fumbling through the distorted focus that goes with crumbling sanity.

I lurched along for two blocks before I was able to pull myself up enough to notice the stares of the passers-by, the way they drew away when I approached.

I turned into one of those big, milling, red-front lunchrooms, and walked straight back to the men's room with my head down. It was the best place I could have picked. There was a kind of bum's hangout, a place where you could get a glass of beer and a sandwich for fifteen cents, a hot meal for a quarter. Mine wasn't the only black eye in the place.

But I wasn't expecting what I found in the mirror over the grimy washbowl. I had a pair of lips like inner tubes, my eye was discolored and my left cheek was puffy, and from the cut on the cheekbone a dribble of blood had snaked down my face. And the old bruise on my chin, where Sundstrom had clipped me, was sullenly purple and mustard yellow.

I washed as well as I could with my handkerchief. There wasn't any soap and I wouldn't have touched that roller towel with asbestos gloves. I went into one of the booths and dried my face on my shirt-tail. Then I combed my hair. I didn't resemble any Mel Blaine I had ever known. Which was all to the good, I suppose. This wasn't the face that sold a million bars of soap in '46.

The phone booth was next to the wash-room, and I slipped in and called Calamity at the office.

She said cheerfully, "What's new, stew?"

"Just listen and do exactly what I say," I said swiftly. "Call the airport and take a ticket for M. Blaine on the next plane for anywhere—Florida. Have Joe Chandler pick it up." Chandler was one of my artists, and he was about my build. "Tell him, when he gets where he's going, to go to the best hotel and wait for me. In case he gets curious, tell him I'm working on an account. Got that?"

I heard her breathe heavily into the phone. "What kind of fool trick is this, Mel?" she asked.

"Sister," I said, "I'm scared. They've got nine hooks in me now and the tenth is going to jerk me right out of the water. I'm not running away, Calam, but I need time. If they pick up Joe Chandler's trail out of the airport, it'll give me a breather. But God knows," I said despairingly, "what I'm going to do with it!"

She didn't cut up or put the rough edge on me, the way she usually did. She just said quietly, "All right, Mel. Give me a ring if you need anything."

"I sure will. Thanks, Calam."

And now it begins, I thought as I slipped furtively out of the booth—the running, the dodging, the hiding. Before this, that had just been something that happened in a Hitchcock movie with a happy ending, only Hitchcock wasn't writing this scenario. The cops were, Eddie Woods was, and so were a thin man in a plaid suit, somebody called the Lion and . . . Helene.

Helene! All things began and ended with Helene.

She still had, I knew, the apartment on Mt. Prospect Avenue where we had lived together. She hadn't wanted to stay there, but with the housing situation, she had no choice.

On my keyring, I still had a key to her door. I hadn't meant to keep it. In fact, I had turned over my key to her when I moved out. This was one I thought I'd lost while we were still married. It had fallen into the lining of my overcoat through a hole in my pocket. I had never sent it back. It was a kind of link, I suppose. I'd never have used it, but there it was. If it hadn't been for the key, I wouldn't have thought of going to her apartment that day.

I hailed a cruising cab at the corner and had the cabby let me out two blocks past the Mt. Prospect address. Already I was acting like a criminal on the lam. I gave my head an angry shake and walked boldly down the street.

There was a painful rush of memory when I climbed the once-familiar stairs. The key still worked in Helene's door, and there the memories ended.

It wasn't the same place. She had changed everything—the furniture, the rugs, the drapes and even the pictures on the wall. Everything that would remind her of me was gone. Everything now was done in the smooth, impersonal angles of functional

modern design—as warm and livable as a nice, clean bathtub.

I closed the door softly and stepped from the small foyer into the living room. I could tell she wasn't in. There's something special about the quiet of empty rooms. But to make sure, I tiptoed to the kitchen, then to the bedroom. The white french phone was still on the shelf of a night table beside the angular bed. That hadn't been changed. I stood staring at it, but not for any sentimental reason. On the night table lay the small, pearl-handled gun I had once given her, as a gag, for Christmas.

My breath caught in my throat like sand. She *had* thought of killing me. She'd probably had the gun in her hand while I was talking to her over the phone.

But she had gone out and left the gun behind.

I walked over, picked it up, grimaced painfully, and dropped it into my pocket. As I turned, I saw something else on the dresser. An 8 by 10 photograph—of me! It had been enlarged from a snapshot, and for some reason it had caught Helene's fancy. There wasn't anything special about it. Against a background of fir trees and a lake, I was standing, facing the camera, dressed in slacks and a sport jacket. It lay there, unframed, on a brown manila envelope. I picked it up, wondering. There was suddenly something disturbing about that photograph.

I heard the outer door open and close. I dropped the photograph back on the dresser and quickly stepped to the side of the bedroom door.

HELENE came into the living room. She walked with a sodden, lifeless step. She took off her hat, gave her head a shake, and threw the hat into a chair. She took off her coat, stood for a moment with her eyes closed, then walked to the sofa, the coat trailing from her hand. She sat with her head bowed. She flicked the back of her hand across her eyes. She was crying.

I took a step into the room and said, "Helene."

Her head jerked up. She crouched back into the cushions with a little cry. She hadn't recognized me.

I grimaced. "It's me—Mel."

She whispered, almost in horror, "What

are you doing here? What do you want?"

"I want to talk to you, Helene."

"No! Get out. Go away!" Her mouth trembled and she drew the coat up to her chin as if to hide behind it. "Please go away. Please, Mel." Her eyes refused to meet mine.

I said, "You were checking up on me."

She didn't answer. She lowered her head and closed her eyes.

Suddenly I was angry. "You've made up your mind, haven't you? You're going to the police. You're going to turn me in. Did you get affidavits from everybody? Did you get their signatures on the dotted line?" How about Charley down at Charley's Bar and Grill? Did he sign? Or Eddie Woods? What about Jimmie the Oysterman? I must have shot my mouth off there, too. I shot it off every place else. What did Jimmie have to say about me? Did I leave his place waving a gun in the air, jump into a cab screaming Delmar's address at the top of my lungs? What's the good word from Jimmie the Oysterman?"

Her eyes flared and the softness went out of them. That's the way it had always been between us. Her temper caught fire from mine.

She sat up straight. "You told him you'd see that Frank never married me!" she cried. "Do you deny that?"

In one more minute it would have been another of our battle-royals—except that the anger ran out of me like mercury from a broken thermometer. I made a tired, defeated gesture.

"No," I said. "No, I don't deny it. In fact, I almost remember saying it. But I didn't kill Sundstrom. I didn't frame Delmar."

"What else would you say?" she said scornfully.

"Nothing, I suppose. It just happens to be the truth, that's all."

"The truth! The truth from you! I don't want your kind of truth. I'm going to tell you something before you go. Frank was almost certain you were the one who attacked him, but he wasn't sure, so he didn't say anything. Do you understand that? He's shielding you until he has definite proof. That's the kind of man Frank Delmar is!"

I gasped, "You believe that?"

"Believe it! I have proof! The threats

you made, the murderous mood you were in when you left Jimmie's! Oh, Mel!" Her fierceness broke. She took her lip between her teeth and turned away from me. "I'm not vindictive," she said in a muffled voice. "I'm doing what I think is right. Go away, Mel. Please go away. Please!"

With a kind of hopelessness, I said dully, "I'm still in love with you, and you're still in love with me. It's a mess, isn't it?"

Her head was down, her hands over her face, and her hair fell over her fingers. She didn't look up when I walked out. I felt like crying. Not because of the mess I was in, but because Helene was alone and desperately unhappy, and there wasn't a thing I could do about it.

I started to walk. You walk because you want to be alone, and I wanted to be alone with all the little thoughts about Helene. I was just torturing myself, for I was thinking of all the might-have-been's and the way-it-used-to-be's and things like that, and it wasn't any good. It never is any good, and the first thing you know you're standing at the end of a wharf looking down at the oily, scummy surface of the river and wondering if you have the guts to break through it and stay there. It's no good.

At the corner of Lincoln and Peshine, a maverick cab came cruising along and I hailed it. I didn't give a particular damn whether I went any place or not, but it looked like a nice cave to hide in. When I got inside, though, my mind started to grind again, and instead of ordering him off for a ride in the country, I leaned forward and said:

"Go back about four blocks on Mt. Prospect until you come to a yellow roadster parked in front of an apartment house. Park in back of it and try to look inconspicuous. I'll take it from there."

"Okay, Cap," he said in a tired voice, and swung the cab around in a languid U-turn. As far as he was concerned, I could cut any shenanigan I wanted, as long as I paid for it. He drove with his right hand and let his left arm dangle outside the cab.

We didn't get back any too soon. As we passed the apartment, Helene came down the steps with her head lowered, as if she were in a hurry, crossed the sidewalk to her roadster, and ducked into it.

I said, "Follow that yellow car."

He turned his head, leered at me from

under his sleepy lids and said in the same tired voice, "Okay, Cap."

He may have looked sleepy, but he wasn't. Helene drove, the way she always did, as if the beagles were at her heels. She dived into traffic like a scared rabbit, threaded through it as if it were underbrush, skittered down the open streets, jumped the lights—and we stuck. We stuck to her clear down to Market Street, and when she parked and scurried into the Palmer Building, we were no more than twenty-five feet behind.

The driver looked around and said, "Okay, Cap?"

I jumped out. "Wait here," I said and sprinted for the building.

I had a feeling of terrible urgency. She wasn't in the lobby by the time I got there, of course, so I went up to the directory beside the bank of elevators and fingered my eye down until I came to—O'Connor, Leo X., att'y.

Delmar's lawyer. I didn't have to be taken by the hand and told in basic English where she had gone. She had gone to O'Connor's office. That was all too plain—as plain as a judge saying, "by the neck until dead." She and O'Connor were up there tying the noose. She had the rope, and O'Connor had the skill, and it was my neck. A nice little three-some. I felt sick.

I WENT back to the cab and crawled in. I still had a hunch, a forlorn tail-end of hope. I said, "Wait for a while," and put a cigarette in my mouth. I didn't light it. I kept it in my mouth until it got so wet the shredded tobacco came apart between my teeth, then I threw it away and took another.

The driver went to sleep, or looked as if he did. He slid down in his seat, tipped his hat forward over his eyes and put his feet up on the dash. I just sat there, chewing cigarettes, holding on with both hands. That was all I had, that scrap of washed-out hope.

She came out of the building fast, her chin up, her heels snapping on the sidewalk; and right behind her was O'Connor. I recognized him from the newspaper pictures. His coat and vest were open and flapping. He was a big man, with an important, prosperous paunch, and a flaming whiskey face, brighter because of

the anger you could see burning in him. He hurried after her and grabbed the door of the car before she could slam it. He stood there arguing for a moment, then hunched his shoulders and jammed himself into the car beside her.

I took the driver by the shoulder and shook him. "Follow that car again!" I said breathlessly. "And don't lose it!"

He said mildly, "Okay, Cap," and with a careless flip of his hand, slipped the cab into low gear.

Helene drove as if she were fleeing from the sound of O'Connor's voice. You could see anger in the swooping, screaming turns she made, in the reckless darting, in the way she slammed on her brakes when there was no possibility of jumping a red light. We followed them clear back to her apartment on Mt. Prospect Avenue. She was out first and striding around the front of the car before O'Connor got his door open, but he was right on her heels again before she got to the front door. He was still arguing.

I waited until they were well inside, then got out of the cab. The driver looked at me with open hostility and said, "That'll be ten bucks, Cap."

I said, "What?"

"Ten bucks."

The bottom fell out of my stomach. Ten bucks wasn't the fare—it was blackmail, petty blackmail, reinforced by the gray bleakness in his lidded eyes. I felt my legs jerk with a panicky impulse to run. He must have seen something—maybe my picture in the paper, or perhaps there was a new story out on the killing, naming me. I took out my wallet and worked a ten from it with trembling fingers. He snatched it contemptuously.

"You lousy, nosy private snoops," he sneered. "I can spot any of you a block off just by the smell. What is it, a divorce case, Cap? Do you like your work? Do you enjoy busting up a home? I sure would enjoy busting one of you right in the nose—and I will, one of these days. You tough guys, you lousy, stinking tough guys. You make me sick, every one of you!"

I laughed. I couldn't help it. It was sheer relief. I even felt friendly toward him.

"Listen," I said, "I'm not a detective. That was my wife, and I love her. I don't

want a divorce. I've had one. She's really my ex-wife, but I want her back. That's what it's all about."

His face burned and his eyes fumbled for a place to hide. He mumbled, "Dammit, Cap, I'm sorry . . ." Then he blurted, "You can't blame me. A lousy snoop busted me and my wife up two years ago, on account of . . . well, it didn't mean nothing, to me. I was soused. The fare isn't ten bucks, Cap. It's an even dollar-forty."

I pushed back his offered hand with the ten bucks in it and said, "Keep it, brother. You earned it, believe me." I gave him a quick grin and walked away, feeling friendlier than ever. Maybe it's cockeyed, but things don't look so bad or hopeless when you find out other people have got themselves in a box, too, and are all mixed up trying to get out again.

Inside the apartment house, I took the key from the ring because I didn't want it to jangle with the others when I went in. That was what I was going to do—go right in on them and hear what was going on, hear what had made O'Connor so sore. He'd been steaming at the seams when he followed Helene from the car.

I fitted the key into her lock, took a long breath and held it as I eased the door open wide enough for me to go through. I left it open. I didn't want to take the chance of the latch snicking and startling them. I was lucky; neither of them noticed me as I slipped into the foyer.

CHAPTER FOUR

Blarney and Bluff

HELENE was sitting stiffly on the sofa, her lips drawn up and her eyes looking down at the floor in that stubborn way she has when somebody is trying to talk her into something. O'Connor had his back to me, and he was talking very persuasively. He had one of those melodious Irish voices, and he could use it the way a conductor uses the instruments in a symphony orchestra. Right now it was a muted cello, full of pathos.

"... sitting there alone in his cell," he was saying. "Frank Delmar is depending on you, Helene. You, and you alone, hold his life in your two hands. You have all the evidence that points to the real mur-

derer of Sonny Sundstrom. You told me that much. You have the names of the men who can testify that your ex-husband was in a murderous rage and that he made threats. That testimony would free Frank Delmar, the man you love. Give me the names of those men." His voice throbbed.

My hand crept to the little gun in my pocket. Murderous rage. That's what he said I'd had. Well, I had it now, all right. I felt it crawl across my shoulder muscles and tighten on the back of my neck. I wanted to snatch out the gun and let O'Connor have everything that was in it, because it was his plot to put me where I was. I could see that. He had hinged the plot on Helene, so that she would damn me. The police would never believe anything Delmar had to say—but they would believe Helene, and the bartender from Charley's Grill on Market Street and Jimmie from Jimmie the Oysterman's. That was what O'Connor was playing for.

Helene looked steadily at him and said, "No. I'm not sure. I want to talk to Mel again. He was here, and I sent him away before I could find out. I want to talk to him again. I can tell when he's lying. I always could. I want to be sure." Her hands, in her lap, tightened obstinately.

"You want to be sure? Of course you want to be sure! Frank would be the first to say to you, 'Helene, don't, for God's sake, send another man to crouch in the shadow of the executioner!'" His voice was as clarion as the clear notes of a silver trumpet. Then it melted like a descending arpeggio of a harp.

"But you must face the facts. What do the facts say to you, Helene? Do they say that a certain man—who by chance happens to be your ex-husband—had whipped himself into a fever heat that demanded a killing to satisfy it, to quench it? Do the facts say that Melville Blaine hated Frank Delmar and attempted to kill him but was prevented by Frank's friend Sundstrom, who lost *his* life saving the life of his friend? What do the facts say to you, Helene?"

Perhaps Helene didn't really waver under the spell of that magic voice of O'Connor's, but I thought she did. I stepped from behind the wall of the arch between the foyer and the living room, the gun tight and cold in my hand. Helene's eyes flew wide, and after a pause, O'Connor turned slowly.

I said harshly, "Tell her the rest of it, O'Connor. Tell her how you planned this frame-up. Go ahead, tell her that!"

He said warily, "Frame-up?" and turned back until he could see Helene's face from the corner of his eye. "Frame-up, Blaine?" He held his hands away from his sides, so that if I shot, it would have to be at an unarmed man and in cold blood.

"Frame-up, yes!" I said violently. I hated his pink, paunchy face. "Tell her about it before I—" I stopped dead. I was defeating myself with my own violence. I could see it in Helene's face, in the way comprehension spread and narrowed her eyes.

"Before you shoot me?" O'Connor said blandly. His eyes licked sideways at Helene to see how she was taking his attack. "The way you shot Sundstrom, Blaine? In jealous anger against the fiancé of your ex-wife? You love her, don't you?"

I looked straight at Helene. "Yes, I love her," I said steadily.

"And you didn't want Frank Delmar to have her, did you?"

"No, I didn't want Delmar to dirty her life."

"So you tried to kill him!" he said triumphantly.

I had been waiting for that. I said slowly, "No, I didn't try to kill him. Not because I didn't want to, but because I'm a damn fool. Because my way of solving my problems is to go out and get stinking drunk and make believe there isn't any problem. Ask Helene. Ask her why she divorced me. Go ahead, ask her."

He didn't ask her. He was smarter than that. He could see that I had her remembering. Instead, he smiled a little sadly. He looked at Helene and said gently, "If the defense of every murderer brought to justice was that he had never killed before and therefore he couldn't possibly be a murderer—there wouldn't be any murderers, would there? There is murder in everybody. I have felt the impulse to kill, yet I am not a murderer. Have *you*, Helene, ever felt the desire to kill? Have *you*? Of course you have, but being a sane, balanced person you suppressed it. Mel here has admitted he is not a balanced person. When he has a problem to face, does he face it like a normal person? No, he does not. He goes out and drinks himself into a state

of sodden insensibility. Is that the act of a person you can depend on? You don't have to answer me. I can see by your face that you know. And this is what I say!" his voice rose with emphasis. "A man who will drink to escape his duties as a husband, will kill to escape from his jealousy. A man who will get drunk is unbalanced, and a man who is unbalanced will kill!"

HELENE'S eyes turned slowly from O'Connor to me. They were dark and troubled, bewildered. Her fingers twisted in anguish in her lap.

O'Connor said severely to me, "And I'd like also to say, Blaine, that if you are trying merely to save your neck, you will continue to torment Helene. Go on—browbeat her! Bludgeon her, shout at her. But I warn you, the more you do, the less she will believe you. Or speak softly to her, Blaine, play on her emotions. Get her to recall the happy days of your doomed marriage. Bewilder her with remembered happiness. But I warn you again. That won't work either."

He looked regretfully at Helene, as if it grieved him to shatter her misplaced loyalty, then turned back to me. His lips were sly.

"In fact," he said, with apparent resignation, "I'll leave you two alone. Talk to her, convince her. If she believes you, I'll abide by her decision and—" He stopped, looked down at his hands and turned them slowly, palms upward. "And Frank Delmar will die," he finished quietly. "It's out of my hands and in yours." He smiled at Helene. "There is nothing more I can say or do."

He had put her in an impossible spot. There was more pure agony in her face than ever I wanted to see again.

I said quickly, "Wait a minute, O'Connor. I want to talk to you first. Let Helene go downstairs and have a cocktail. Go down to the bar, Helene," I said. "Have a drink and come back in a half hour. Have two cocktails, strong ones. You're all tied in a knot. Go ahead. Go downstairs."

Obediently, she pushed herself up from the sofa, but she moved with the brittle slowness of an old woman. Her cheeks looked haggard. "I'd like to think . . . for a while," she said mechanically.

As she passed me, I took her hand and stopped her, and at the same time slipped

into the palm of her hand the key I had used to get into her apartment. It was the only way I could think of to tell her to come back as quickly as she could without letting O'Connor know.

Wildly improvising, I said, "And no police."

Her eyes were slightly questioning, but she said steadily, "No police, Mel."

I let her go.

O'Connor watched narrowly until the door had closed behind her. He crossed the room in swift strides and opened the door to a crack and watched again until I heard the whirr of the automatic elevator in the corridor outside. The gates clanged and he closed the door with a satisfied air. He came back into the room, buttoning his flapping vest. He took a cigar from a silver case, carefully cut off the end and put it in an ash tray.

He looked at me with shrewd eyes and said affably, "You're a smart one, Blaine. You had me going there for a minute. I thought you were going to make it. You almost did, you know."

I was willing to go along with his small talk. I wanted to give Helene time to get back. I walked away from him across the room and leaned against the radio, so he'd have to face me with his back to the door.

"You pulled out of it," I said, as bitterly as I could manage with my heart thundering. "You did all right."

He laughed quietly. "Well," he said, "a trick of the trade, you know. Just a trick of the trade. Let your opponent talk and hang him on his own words. I admire you, Blaine. You'd have made a good trial lawyer, for a fact."

I turned on the radio, praying that Helene wouldn't come back before the sound of the music would hide any noise she might make coming in. I didn't know how sharp his ears were. Damned sharp, I was afraid. The music swelled, and I tuned it so we could talk over the beat. Behind him I saw the door start to move inward.

"I didn't have much chance against you, I guess," I said, to focus his interest. "A good amateur can never beat a good professional."

"Oh, I don't know," he said condescendingly. "The trouble with a professional is that he sometimes gets a little sloppy out of overconfidence. You know, the last time

I had one of these cases, I swore I'd never take another. I'm sick of Frank Delmar and his messes. Ever since I took that louse as a client, I've earned my money. Except for me, he'd have been hanged ten years ago. Ten years ago," he said impressively.

I could breathe easily, for Helene had slipped through the doorway and was now out of sight behind the partition that separated the foyer from the living room.

I SAID briskly, "O'Connor, I'm a businessman and you're a businessman, right?"

He lifted his eyebrows. "Naturally."

"We can speak frankly?"

"You mean you're going to talk about money?"

"Naturally." I mimicked his tone.

He laughed. "That simplifies things. I thought you were going to be the injured hero again. By hell, if there's anything I hate it's an injured hero. I like practical men. We'll talk business. Frankly, I'm getting a hundred thousand dollars to get Delmar out of this mess, and I'm going to do it. Don't get any fancy ideas about that. That's a lot of money, and I can use a lot of money. But, being a businessman, I can see that I'll have to make a deal. I'll give you ten thousand dollars and time to get out of the country. But you'll have to leave me a written confession. I want something for my money."

"But I didn't kill Sundstrom, O'Connor."

"Bless and preserve us!" He rolled his eyes and said dryly, "So you *are* going to be the injured hero after all."

"No. I wanted to get that straight. I'll take your ten thousand, but I'm not going to run if Delmar didn't kill Sundstrom. Why should I? If there's a murderer loose, he might get caught, and why should I spend the rest of my life hiding in rat-holes if there's a chance that both Delmar and I will get out of it?"

"A good point." He glanced over his shoulder as if to reassure himself with the sight of the closed door.

I said, "Well, did he or didn't he?"

He eyed me speculatively. He muttered, "There's an outside chance that you might be able to persuade your ex-wife that you're free and clear. I don't think you can. I think I can beat you at every turn. . . ."

He brightened, "Come to think of it,

even if you confess, Blaine, I can get you out of it, too. We can say you went up to talk to Delmar, and Sundstrom stuck his ugly face in the argument. His temper is notorious. We can say you killed him in self-defense, and in panic you slugged Delmar and made your escape. I could get you off on a plea like that, Blaine. By heaven, I could!" He started to laugh.

"That's the kind of case I love," he said eagerly. "Here you are, an innocent guy. You're being framed, but forget that. Delmar's reputation is foul; you go to his apartment to plead with him not to spoil the life of the girl you love. . . . Man! What I could do with a case like that!"

"Then Delmar did kill Sundstrom?"

"Of course he killed him," O'Connor said contemptuously. "He had a perfect case himself and he spit it up a rainpipe, claiming he was attacked by an unknown assailant."

"Why did he kill Sundstrom?" I asked, as steadily as I could.

"He was Sundstrom's manager, and he was gypping the poor Swede every chance he got. Finally Sundstrom got wise, and he went up to beat it out of Frank. Frank is pretty dumb, but he's not a push-over for that kind of play. He put four bullets in Sundstrom. He should have yelled for the cops right away. Even with his reputation, I could have gotten him out of it. But no, he had to play it cozy. He got scared, and he blew his top and . . . pffft!" O'Connor snapped his fingers, smiled derisively. "Now," his voice turned brisk and business-like again, "I've made my proposition. What do you say?"

I looked up toward the empty arch behind him. "What should I say, Helene?"

He stood stricken, then whirled. Helene faced him, white-lipped, her hand to her cheek. She stood stiffly, then turned and ran out the apartment door.

O'Connor's mouth turned to rubber. The cigar slipped from between his fingers, and he stooped and picked it off the rug.

"There," he said wryly, "goes a hundred thousand dollars." Then harshly, "Well, you fool! What are you standing there for? At least give me the satisfaction of going after her. Give me *something* for my money!"

I ran past him.

THE END



DEATH GRIP

THREE days after the funeral, Myra Lamson began the tedious task of death in a small town. She spread out the sympathy notes on the dining room table. They were much the same. "In your time of great bereavement . . ."
"We are with you at this sad time . . ."

Myra shook her head, bewildered that those who lived so close could see this as a time for sorrow. She started addressing the envelopes for the cards she would send

By
DAVE CROCKETT

With terror in her heart, Myra at last recognized the trap—the kind of a trap only murderers know.

In reply, working quickly, enjoying the rhythmic pattern: reach, write, insert, seal, stack. When she finished she ran fingers up the edges of two stacks. She pressed each pile, feeling that one held more cards than the other. Leveling them, she relaxed and smiled at the neatness. Thirty-two letters, thirty-two variations on a social theme, thirty-two people would see that Myra was dutiful. And not one of the thirty-two would ever suspect the clear, curt words of the obituary, "died of natural causes." No one in that innocent town would think of her and murder.

And now she was free. For the first time in eighteen years, seven months, and twelve days, Myra was the mistress of her house.

Her first thought was to prolong the ecstasy of being alone. She walked from the dining room to the massive door of the study and opened it. The room had an odor of its own, one of floor wax and furniture polish held in close confinement. There in the room, with its strange aroma, she felt the shadow of her husband. His touch was everywhere. The blinds were drawn to keep the rugs from fading. Cotton covers protected each cushion. The strong, friendly fireplace was blocked because it caused a draft. She could almost feel his stinging hand on her arm, holding her back.

Deliberately, Myra moved around the room, hesitating briefly before each piece of furniture. She lifted the corner of a cover from the back of the big chair. The topaz mohair was as bright as the day it had first caught her heart, soon after the wedding. A strength, foreign for so long, swelled through her, and she swept the cover off as one would unveil a monument. Then she backed toward the fireplace to catch the full beauty, and there was the touch of a sob as she saw how the brightness of the fabric lightened the somber room.

She moved to the sofa and sat carefully on the edge; habit was still strong. Hating the old caution, she slid back against the cushions, rumpling them for comfort. A lone winter sunbeam peered in between the blinds and tip-toed across her face. There was no warmth in it but the brightness stirred a dream. Some day, not too soon but someday, there would be a fire

in the fireplace. Jagged blocks of maple would cast their pent-up heat and color over her face. She relaxed and held herself a bit above sleep, a bit below full consciousness, planning the changes.

Claire, the maid, would be first. The stupid woman would have to go. The poorly painted picture of Martin would be taken from its place over the mantel. But that would have to wait a bit. The first room she would fix would be the bedroom, now so utterly her own. There would be curtains of windblown blue and a mirror on a silken cord.

THE bell broke her reverie. She heard the house complain as Claire moved to the front door. She turned slightly to face the study door, listening for the first sound that would name the visitor. Enough of the worn, bass tones leaked in to tell her it was the doctor. By the time the front door closed, Myra had dropped her smile to wear again the grieving mantle of the recent widow. She was sitting straight on the sofa's edge when Claire came in.

"Mrs. Lamson," she said, but her ugly inflection belied respect, "the doctor's here."

Dr. Seiss searched the gloom to find her, then walked toward her. He laid his hat and bag on the center table. Myra hoped the man would feel the lack of welcome and make his visit short, but he turned to the chair and found comfort there before he spoke.

"Afternoon, Myra. Just out on a call down the street and thought I'd drop in to see if you're all right."

"I slept better last night, doctor," she said, wondering if her voice satisfied the occasion, and thinking that if he noticed tenseness it could be expected after death.

"Good. Take one of those pills if you have any trouble."

Myra saw him lean back against the cushions of the chair, enjoying the moment of relaxation. She started to stand, but he went on.

"Matter of fact, I think I'll prescribe some pills for myself. Been lying awake nights trying to figure out about Martin. Two months ago I went over him with a fine-tooth comb. Sound as a board."

Myra knew she was expected to say the right, trite thing. She tried her voice care-

fully, unsure of how much sorrow was appropriate. "That's what makes it worse, doctor. The suddenness." She watched and felt relieved as the man nodded.

"You've been mighty brave, Myra." He was quiet a moment, then stood and added, "Call me if you need me, won't you?"

"Of course I will. And thanks for coming." She tried a simple smile that would fit a face of mourning. He took his hat and bag from the table, walked to the door and waved a silent good-by, closing the door behind him.

For a frightened moment Myra held the rigid pose. The footsteps moved down the hall and she heard the front door open and close. Then, for the first time in what seemed ages, Myra breathed a deep, full, timeless breath that was sweet and strong in her tense chest. The last doubt scurried down the street behind the noisy car of Doctor Seiss. The ecstasy of the hour came crowding back around her. When she'd first entered the room she'd known only freedom. Now safety had been added.

SHE sent her mind again into the happy future. Room by room she dreamed over the ancient house, marking for discard the cheap pieces Martin had insisted were practical. Distance between the dream and reality was long, and Myra scarcely heard the knock on the door.

The maid walked in, swinging her heavy body half around to close the door behind her. She wore the look of the professional mourner, like those others at the funeral.

"I'm fixing a bite for myself and I wondered if you wouldn't want something," she said.

"No, thank you, Claire, but you go ahead." Myra waited, anxious to be alone again, but the woman didn't leave. Instead she began a stupid circling of the room, testing for dust on the mantel, rolling back the fringe of the rug and stomping it down again. The aimless movement brought her in front of the topaz chair, where she stopped and pointed a blunt finger at the splash of color.

"You took off the cover." The voice was filled with evil accusation. "Mr. Lamson wouldn't like that."

Myra forced herself to look straight into the outraged face of the maid. "Mr. Lamson isn't here now, Claire, and I intend to

make a few changes." She paced her reply evenly, slowly, so no exultation would find its way into her words.

The maid turned away, making another short round of the room. "Speaking of the Mister," she said as she came near again, "I wouldn't be at all surprised if he mighta lived longer if he'd watched what he ate."

Claire had seemed to toss the words into the space between them, but Myra waited, half breathing, testing each word and inflection for anything more than insolence. If more were meant, she missed it.

"That may be, Claire. But do you think this is the time to talk that way? I'd like very much to be alone. I'm sure you can find things to keep you busy in the kitchen."

Claire stood now, immobile, blocking the fireplace. "Lordy, ma'am, I know how tired you must be. The way you took care of Mr. Lamson that last week was enough to make anyone sick. Ain't many wives would do for their husbands the way you did. But then, of course, he'll be making it up to you in a way, won't he? Saved up a bit of money, I hear tell."

"Claire," Myra said, feeling the flush first on her neck and knowing that anger would come too fast. "Please leave."

"Maybe I don't wanta leave," said the woman, planting her enormous feet deep in the rug.

It was monstrous. She just stood there with a thin smirk making her mouth more hateful than ever.

Myra's anger flared. "Claire, I not only want you to leave this room, but I want you to pack and leave this house, immediately."

Claire sauntered across the room and eased her fat body into the topaz chair. "I don't think I'll be leaving. I've got no place to go, and no money like some folks I know." She seemed to enjoy each word as she spoke. "If I was to have to leave and maybe have to turn to charity, I might just begin remembering things, like how you served Mr. Lamson all his meals that last week, and like how you never called the doctor until the Mister had been down three days."

Myra lifted her face and stared full into Claire's eyes. She saw the insinuation carved across the hated face. A frenzy stirred deep within her.

But Myra, living with Martin, had learned to bluff to gain small islands of freedom from domination.

"Claire, I don't intend to have any trouble with you. You'll leave now, or I'll see to it that you're forced to leave."

Myra watched the twisted mask across the room for the first reflection of effect, counting breaths to gain control. When it came, the voice was low, but Myra felt the heavy tones roll through the room.

"Go ahead, call the police. Maybe I could tell them something they don't know."

DEEP in her body Myra could feel a scream start toward release. Her hands caught and twisted the cushion on each side of her. The muscles over her ribs tightened, as though she were about to spring from the sofa. Her throat strained to hold the anguish. The effort was greater now that she was near to freedom.

"Claire. Go. Now!"

Claire stood up and posed a moment. Then she turned from the topaz chair and reached for the cover on the floor.

"Claire!" It was a frantic cry as Myra bolted from the sofa.

The word hung between them, seeming to echo where no echo would have been. Claire turned, half-stooped, and Myra saw the vicious face tipped up at her as an animal might glare above its food.

The maid straightened up, holding the cloth in her hand. "Well?"

The one word was a challenge. She seemed to wait through a long breath. Then she turned to slip the cover over the chair, slowly, deliberately tucking the corners firmly into place. She gave the chair one last needless pat and walked out of the room.

Myra heard the stairway shift its strength to carry the woman's weight to the second floor. Now the only sounds in the house were the words that went whispering along the mantel, bouncing from the mirror, racing over the table top. *Go ahead, call the police.*

She needed movement to shake the fear. Blind to the table's edge and the ottoman, she bumped them as she stumbled to the topaz chair and grabbed the cover with fingers that clutched the cloth. Her muscles tensed for the ripping gesture that

would bring the pleasure back. But the words of the woman came again; this time, it seemed, from over the fireplace. Standing behind the chair, hand straining against the material, Myra looked across the darkening room to the picture of Martin above the mantel. As she stared at the friendless, painted image, it faded and became the face of Claire, merciless and eternal.

Her hand loosened in the material and slid from the chair.



It was a gay wedding: The guests were stewed, the bride wore white—and the groom was dead!

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"Look, copper," Bunny Antovil said. "Where is this getting you? You know I don't have to talk."

NOBODY LOVES A COP

By DENNIS WIEGAND

*To Sergeant Oliver, cops were dames
and dames were poison. Then he got
stuck with a lush little blonde who was
definitely all three. . . .*

HERE in mid-block, and with the street lights' glare accordingly softened, the old brownstone house let one look into the past a little. Police-Sergeant Ralph Oliver knew only too well how scarred and dismal those facades looked by daylight. Every officer assigned to the Vice Squad knew the street and the district well.

He propped himself, half-sitting, against the iron railing that ran along the sidewalk, guarding the concrete pit of a basement entrance to what had once been a mansion. As he lit a cigarette, he wondered about the people who had built the house. Such unlikely musings for a policeman, he supposed, were prompted by the fact that everybody and his sisters and his cousins and his aunts were busily writing cute little books of reminiscence about immediate ancestors.

The clicking of the girl's heels in the silence of the deserted street brought him sharply back to the tawdry present. He took in at a glance the too-bright blonde hair and the lush figure outlined against the distant street light.

He thrust out one long leg to halt her as she came sauntering abreast of him.

"Just a minute, sister," he said, letting the cigarette cling to the corner of his lips. "You're new around here."

"So what?" she demanded. "You own the block or something? Outta my way, lug."

"Practically," he said. "Just figuring out what I don't own so I can go around first thing in the morning to buy it."

"Big operator, huh?" sneered the blonde. "Well, I already got a apartment. So move that gam before I tear it off and throw it across the street to the cats."

He added an arm to the barrier already set up by the outthrust leg.

"I want to talk to you, kid," he said. "Your time's not so valuable."

"Sure, go ahead. I got all night." There was the oily snicker of metal and then a slight clatter.

"That's just so you don't run off and leave me and break my poor little heart," she explained.

The headlights of a parked car, fifty yards down the street, flared to life. A spotlight probed briefly and then found them. By its light Sergeant Oliver saw what he already felt. He was handcuffed quite completely to the iron railing.

"What's this angle?" he asked calmly, sliding his free right hand inside his coat.

"Don't be a sucker," the girl advised him curtly. "That's a police car over there. You be a good boy and you get a chance to ride in it. Alive."

The familiar flat-footed tread of heavy men told him, without looking, that she was

telling the truth. One of the plainclothesmen was dangling a blackjack casually at his side.

"Nice work, pal," said one of the detectives.

"Oh, brother," laughed the other. "Take yourself a second look!"

"Oh, no!" said the first detective. He covered his eyes with one big hand as if to ward off the sight of a particularly pitiable object.

"Oh, yes!" the second officer assured him. "It's the Sir Galahad of Headquarters Vice. Be careful. That cuff won't hold him—his strength is as the strength of ten, for his heart is pure."

"The act'll go big in vaudeville, boys," cut in the blonde. "But let's tend to business. Do you know this egg?"

Ralph Oliver preserved a dignified silence.

The first detective said, "Policewoman Sally Murphy, permit me to introduce your worthy colleague, Police-Sergeant Ralph Oliver."

"Turn him loose," advised his partner. "The sergeant is no masher. He hates women. The can is full of nice little girls who only tried to support their poor little mothers and buy medicine for their little crippled brothers, and all because of Sergeant Oliver's hard heart."

"Just be sure that you remember the 'sergeant' part of that speech, Craddock," said Oliver.

"Turn him loose, Sally," Craddock said. "We're collecting an audience. Sergeant Oliver's many friends in the district can't be trusted when he's chained up this way."

He turned and glared around at the small crowd which had quietly collected.

"Back to your holes," he ordered. "Move on. Police school is over for tonight. Beat it."

Craddock's more cautious partner thought an apology was in order. "Sorry you walked into our stake-out, Sergeant," he said. "Louses things up for us, too, you know."

"Why wasn't I told you planned a stake-out here tonight?" demanded Oliver.

"You're not on duty tonight," Craddock reminded him. "All the guys on the beat were posted."

"Maybe Sergeant Oliver makes a hobby of these little pick-ups," suggested Sally Murphy. "You know, one for me and one

for the city jail. I say let's run him in."
"Naw, not a chance," said Craddock.
"He don't pick 'em up for himself. Didn't we tell you he hates women?"

IT WAS a dreary, rainy morning. The sort of morning that fitted the mood of the interior decorating of Police Headquarters. But Police-Sergeant Ralph Oliver paid no heed to the familiar ugliness of his surroundings.

As he opened the door of the squad room, there was a sudden hush; but he'd caught the tag-end of laughter and the words "...cuffed neat and tight to the railing..."

Elderly, battered Sergeant Edward Duffy threw himself gallantly into the breach of silence.

"You don't change to your uniform today, Ralph," he said. "You're posted to report to Lieutenant Corcoran for plainclothes assignment. My hearty congratulations."

There was a low-throated rumble of half-articulated congratulations from the officers lounging around in the room.

Wordlessly, Ralph Oliver shut the door, again and strode off down the oak-paneled corridor to Lieutenant Corcoran's office.

Emmett Corcoran was young for his rank, and looked even younger than he was. Short of an untimely bullet, unlikely in a headquarters office, Lieutenant Corcoran would long remain an obstacle to further promotion for Ralph Oliver. This was only one, and not the most important, reason for their mutual dislike.

"Ah, it's you," said Lieutenant Corcoran, lifting his gaze from a stack of reports. "You're being shifted to plainclothes, Oliver. Some scheme cooked up by the Old Man. You're supposed to see him."

"Then what am I doing here?" queried Oliver.

"I just wanted you on the carpet for a minute on all that gun-play in that flat over on Fitzsimmons Avenue last week."

"One of them went for a gun," Oliver said quietly.

"He says cigarettes. Didn't have a gun, as a matter of fact."

"He's been arrested often enough to know he shouldn't reach inside his coat during a pinch," Oliver countered.

"I might take that as an excuse from anyone else," admitted the lieutenant. "But

from you, Oliver—uh-uhh. You're too free with that service pistol."

"Yes, sir," said Oliver, realizing the futility of arguing.

"That's one of the reasons I recommended you for this plainclothes job," pursued the lieutenant. "It might give that hot rod of yours a chance to cool."

"I was wondering how come," admitted Oliver.

"That will be all," said the lieutenant curtly. "It might keep you out of mischief on your night off, too," he added meaningfully. "You won't be looking for any unpaid overtime."

Police-Captain Patrick Murphy was the only senior officer privileged to wear plainclothes who habitually wore a uniform. He said he didn't feel like a policeman otherwise, and feeling like a policeman seemed to be his whole aim in life.

"Sit down, Sergeant," Captain Murphy said. "Lieutenant Corcoran tells me that you're just the man to deal with all these brats who've suddenly turned hophead."

"Who, sir?" said Sergeant Oliver, bewildered by the captain's characteristic way of cutting directly to the heart of the matter.

"These brats who've begun monkeying around with heroin, cocaine, marihuana—the works," the captain said impatiently. "The press, City Hall and every civic group in town is raising the roof about it. Those little guys are the hardest to catch, but it's up to us to do it somehow."

"Yes, sir," said Oliver.

"Now this doesn't call for any fancy gun-play," continued the captain. "In fact, you'll be working with a policewoman. A new one. Very smart. College education. Name's Sally Murphy."

"Yes, sir," said Oliver glumly. "I know her. If anyone will pass as one of these hopped-up juvenile delinquents, she will."

"The fact that her name is Murphy is not a mere coincidence," said the captain grimly. "She's my daughter. I want her exposed to no rough stuff. You'll answer to me personally for anything that goes amiss with her."

"I'm sorry, sir, I didn't know—"

"That'll be all," cut in the captain. "You're entitled to your opinion; but I'd be careful of giving it out in front of Lieutenant Corcoran. A girl's boyfriend isn't likely to be as broad-minded as her father."

The captain reached into a drawer of his desk and drew out a fat file folder. "Here's all the data we have on the ring we think is playing around with this penny-ante game of supplying the stuff to punks. A lot of it you already know. But there's some stuff here from the reports of the men regularly assigned to narcotics control. Policewoman Murphy's already seen it. Take today to go through this and discuss it with her. Dismissed."

I'M IN the police dog-house for sure now, I thought Sergeant Ralph Oliver as he folded his tall, angular frame into a chair behind a vacant desk in an office bay. Who'd have guessed she was the Old Man's kid? Who ever heard of an Irish blonde, anyhow?

This job, he knew, was a form of exile. The regular narcotics men had much bigger fish to fry; and only the publicity-seekers with their instinct for lurid, televised investigations had forced special attention to focus on this one minor segment of the real, and continuous, police job of narcotics control. The public would lose interest in a few weeks, and he'd still be pounding a beat on the fringe of the real problem.

"You look like Calvin examining the manifesto of a new heresy," said a voice at his shoulder. He knew without looking that it was Sally Murphy. It had a husky timbre to it. It fitted the face and the figure and the hair. And none of them fitted into the pattern of college girl, police captain's daughter, nice girl.

"Calvin who?"

"He was a guy who was against sin," she said. "Your face looks as if it had just been chipped out of solid granite. What's the matter? Going to be a sorehead just because you'd rather play with guns than girls? Act your age."

"My age? Maybe you're right. Half of my age has been spent being a cop. So maybe I am only half as old as I look. My growth's been stunted."

"What's wrong with being a cop?" she countered. "I come from a long line of cops."

"Nobody loves a cop," he said sourly. "You'll find that out darn quick."

"My mother does," she countered. "But I suppose that, on the whole, you're right. All the more reason why we cops should

love one another. You could start with me."

"You stick to Corcoran," he said gruffly. "A girl who looks like you is a vice condition. I can't get my mind off my work when you're around."

She laughed, and if her voice sounded like a brook it must have been one with very deep water.

"Aw, just because I handcuffed you to a railing," she said, mock-pleadingly. "But, after all, what's a girl to do with a guy like you if you go around thinking the worst of every girl you meet?"

"I'm not often wrong," he replied. "But let's get to work. You agree with me that Russ Antovil is peddling this stuff to the smart younger crowd?"

"Obviously. Who else is going to bother with the risk of all those small transactions?"

"Well, I'll pick you up at your place at, say, eight o'clock and we'll go get him."

"Just like that," she said. "Like making a date for the movies. Do you know where he is?"

"Naturally. The narcotics boys are going to be sore when we take him out of circulation. They've been trying to trace the source of supply through him. But we've got a priority to mess things up for them."

"Well, we do need a list of his customers to work on, but..."

"What do you mean, a list of customers?" he queried.

"Why, for rehabilitation work, of course," she replied. "It's preventative police work. We can't just let all those little addicts run around loose. They'll find another source of supply."

"What?" he exploded. "I'm supposed to go around holding hands with a bunch of half-baked hopheads and try to lead them back to sweetness and light? I won't do it. I'm a cop, not a ward orderly."

"Look, egg," she said, patiently explaining. "What good does it do to cut off supply? You've got to hit at the demand and eliminate *that*. As long as there's a demand for anything, backed up with money, a supply will be found."

"Maybe, maybe," he dismissed the argument. "But that's not police work. That's social service. That's work for some scared, inhibited dame in a clinic."

"Well," she said with finality, "I'm not scared or inhibited, but I do have a degree

in social service work. What's more, I'm a cop; and the boss has ordered this new approach."

"The boss," scoffed Sergeant Oliver.

"Don't forget he's a captain, even if he is my father," she reminded him tartly.

"That's a deal," he said. "I won't forget that your father's a captain, if you'll kindly remember in the future that I am a sergeant."

"Oh, those poor, mixed-up kids," was all she said in reply.

IN AN unmarked police car parked outside the Pennyland Arcade, Sally Murphy awaited the return of Ralph Oliver and prisoner. She hadn't long to wait, but the sergeant came back without Russ Antovil.

"He wasn't there," explained Ralph, sliding in behind the wheel. "Wait till I get my hands on that stooly! Giving me a bum steer."

"Does Antovil know you by sight?" queried Sally.

"Sure. They all do. That's why it's so silly to assign me to undercover work."

"Then that explains the man who came out of there a few minutes ago wearing one of those comic nose-mustache-glasses things they sell at carnivals and places like Pennyland."

"What!" he exploded. "He couldn't do that. Nobody'd attract attention to himself by wearing one of those things out on the street."

"I'll bet Antovil would," she said. "Especially if he saw you mousing around in there in civilian clothes. He knows you wouldn't be going to a place like Pennyland for your own amusement."

"Oh, Lord!" he groaned. "I'll never live this one down. Never. If he gets the idea we're actually going to put the arm on him, he'll go underground so far he'll come up wearing a pig-tail."

"His wife will know where he is," she reassured him. "And you know I'm not going to tell anyone how he walked right by you wearing an outrageous disguise like that."

"Well, that's something," he said grudgingly. "But as for getting anything out of his wife, not a chance. She's legally his wife, for one thing, and so she can't be compelled to squeal on him. For another, she's in this with him."

"The radiophone just told me that Smiley and Crother's picked her up at her apartment," she pointed out. "A bird in the hand, you know."

"Yeah, but a bird that never learned how to sing. A real tough bird."

"Women don't get that tough, Buster," she told him. "Mrs. Antovil may not love cops; but she does love someone. That's always a good place to start when you're dealing with a woman."

Resignedly, Sergeant Oliver started the police car and eased it out into the traffic.

Under the hard white glare of a drop-light, Bunny Antovil sat calmly, even insolently, and smoked a cigarette. The cigarette was in a long, white holder which would have betrayed the slightest tremor of her hand, had there been any.

By contrast with her sleek, brunette elegance and self-possession, Sergeant Oliver and two Narcotics Squad detectives seemed grubby peasants fresh from cleaning stables. Coats off, ties awry and mopping at perspiration-beaded foreheads, they stood in a semicircle in the attitude of petitioners before the throne.

"Mr. Antovil is not in the habit of confiding the details of his business to me," she said loftily. "And as for his present whereabouts, I am not and never have been a possessive wife. He has no doubt been called away on business."

"Don't hand me that hoity-toity guff," growled Oliver. "You know me, Bunny; and I know you. I know who you are, where you come from, and how you got to be where you are now."

"A girl can change a lot in twenty years," she said, for the first time sounding a little on the defensive.

"A girl, yeah," agreed Oliver. "But you didn't change while you were still a girl. Now stop horsing around and tell us where Russ is hiding out and maybe we'll give you a break."

"Look, copper," she said in a hard, flat voice, "you've been at this for three hours. Where is it getting you? You know I don't have to talk. If you're going to pin a separate rap on me, well, pin it and get it over with. But stop pestering me about Russ."

"Dropped the Park Avenue pose," noted Oliver. "Well, that's some relief."

"I don't get this," she said almost plaintively. "If you got something, why don't

you use it? You guys are always full of ideas, but short on proof."

"This is an idea you wouldn't understand," said Oliver. "This idea is going to stop girls like you from growing up to be women like you. We want Russ. Where is he?"

"You must be nuts," she said.

Sally Murphy, her car shamelessly pressed against the panel of the interrogation room door, almost laughed aloud when she heard Ralph Oliver espousing the cause of "preventive police work" as if he had invented it personally years ago. Just like a man! Give you a big argument and scoff at your ideas, and then turn right around and pass off those ideas as his own.

Reflecting thus, Sally decided that it was time she went in and gave Ralph Oliver a lesson in the elements of feminine psychology. He needed his sleep.

THE heavy oak door of the interrogation room burst open with a bang, and the ornate brass knob bruised a chunk of plaster from the wall. A raging, disheveled blonde ran in clutching at the torn shoulder of a blouse.

"Where is she?" demanded Sally. "Where's the filthy bag who claims to be his wife? Those monkey's sons out there claim you—"

"What is this, Sally?" said Sergeant Oliver wearily. "Now cut out this horseplay and get out of here. Beat it."

"Oh, no, you don't!" said Sally furiously. "I have my rights, even if we're not married yet; and nobody, not even you lousy coppers, is going to pull anything behind Russ's back. Not while I'm here!"

Bunny Antovil fought back the burning tide of blood as it rushed to her cheeks. She struggled for control. This was not the time and place for it. But she knew that the girl must be speaking the truth. She was the type Russ went for, and there'd been a lot of them just like her before. But Russ had always frankly told them, all of them, that he was married. It had never gone this ominously far before.

"You cheap bottle blonde!" Bunny heard herself say. "I am his wife. And that's more than you'll ever be."

"Yeah?" sneered Sally. "Just you go ask him, if you don't believe me."

Bunny knew in her heart that it must be true. Why else would the cops be holding this hussy if they didn't have a good notion she knew where Russ was holed up?

She abandoned the fight for control. She luxuriated in the release of her feelings. She told the girl off. She told the three policemen off. And before she was through, her rampage spent, she'd told them where Russ could be found.

"All right, you tramp," she mouthed. "Go get him! You can have him and welcome! I've done his dirt for sixteen years, and all I get for it is one frowsy blonde after another flung in my face. Go ahead, take him! I don't want him! I don't want to see him again!"

Bunny Antovil looked ten years older when the matron came to take her back down to the cell block. Sergeant Ralph Oliver wearily straightened his tie and replaced his coat.

"Who'd ever have believed it?" he marveled. "Bunny Antovil, of all people!"

"I feel terribly mean, though," said Sally contritely. "It was a shame to play her for a sucker that way. After all, there's something pretty wonderful about love...no matter whose, or for whom."

"Forget it," Oliver said briskly. "She had it coming. She's lived off the fat of the land for years by making suckers out of brainless kids. Let's go get Russ."

He reached inside his coat and slipped his service revolver out of the spring clip that held it under his armpit.

"Here," he said. "You take care of this for me. Put it in your purse. In the future you'll do the deciding when to pull a gun play. I'm beginning to think that your way of playing cops-and-robbers gets more results."

"Thanks," she replied, thrusting back the hand that proffered the heavy pistol. "But there isn't room in a tiny little hand-bag like this one for two of those things."

"Oh," he said.

"Sure, Buster," she said, wrinkling her nose at him. "I'm a cop, see? So's my old man. So's my ex-boyfriend. And so's my new one."

"I guess nobody but us cops loves a cop," said Sergeant Oliver. "You know, I'm even beginning to like poor Lieutenant Corcoran."



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Gripping Mystery Novelette

That lifeless bit of wood, carved into the sinister likeness of a heathen devil-god, obviously could know nothing of Creedy's blonde wife. Yet why did it keep grinning and nodding, grinning and nodding, as if it knew a secret too awful to tell?

CHAPTER ONE

A Gift for Madeleine

HERBERT CREEDY found his Park Avenue apartment deserted, windows closed in the summer heat, filmy dust over everything. Madeleine's picture stood on the piano in the living room, blue-eyed and smiling, with golden hair and wistful mouth, mocking

him with its tender, dreamy look. She was not there herself, however, though he called her name once or twice automatically.

He had arrived home in New York this morning, weeks ahead of schedule, after catching an Army bomber back from

WHEN THE DEVIL-GOD



By JOEL
TOWNSLEY
ROGERS

SMILED

Tulagi unexpectedly and getting an airline seat from San Pedro to LaGuardia Field. He had finished his special assignment some time ago—a series of Korean battle films—and had been wandering around the Solomons ever since. He had rather liked the idea of taking some extra films there, as sort of an aftermath of World War II. But he was glad now he'd gotten the chance for that plane ride home.

He took his kitbag into the bedroom and dropped it on his bed. Looking in her closet, he saw that there were a number of empty dress hangers on the rod, and that the morocco traveling bag he had given her last Christmas was missing from the top closet shelf, and perhaps a hatbox or some other bag. Her jewel case, which she ordinarily kept in their deposit vault at the bank, was standing on her bureau with its lid open, empty.

There was no particular reason why he should have expected to find her home, since she hadn't known that he was returning. Still, he felt a little disconsolate. He had pictured this moment of reunion all the way across the Pacific—Madeleine's look of incredulity as he appeared in the doorway, then her gay little trill of joy as she rushed into his arms.

"Oh, Herbert, I can't BELIEVE it's you! Oh, darling, you look WONDERFUL!"

He was a phlegmatic man, Herbert Creedy: heavy-faced, stolid and middle-aged, with a small judicious mouth and small inexpressive eyes; he did not look at all sentimental. Still, he was. This was a disappointment.

She had no family whom she might be visiting, and no friends with summer places where she might have gone. She had few intimate friends. She liked New York, too. The country or seashore had bored her and made her restless before very long, whenever they had gone away together.

But it was futile to speculate where she had gone, or how long she might be away.

She wasn't here, that was all.

Removing his cap and tunic, Herbert began to unpack his bag, throwing most of the contents out onto the floor in a mildewed heap. At the bottom he found the carved black devil-god, and set it upright on Madeleine's spinet desk, beside

the phone, where it swayed like a drunken tottem pole.

"Here you are, Oscar," he said, with a smile at its menacing look. "America country belong me, belong you now. Sorry Mary fellow belong me no stop. I give you to her when I see her."

Its name wasn't Oscar, of course. It was something like Esoboro, the Crocodile God, at a guess; one of the boys on Tulagi who made a pretense of knowing something about such things had told him that. It was about ten inches high, and made of some very dark, hard wood, which at times seemed extraordinarily heavy—although when he had tested it in water, he had found that it would float.

It was carved in the shape of a man sitting with his legs crossed underneath him. Its head, which occupied about half its length, was long and pointed, with deep pits of eyes, a corrugated forehead, flat nostrils, and rows of pointed teeth in a curled and sneering mouth. Its tiny arms were folded across its narrow chest. Its buttocks and crossed legs were disproportionately heavy, its thighs and ankles intertwining, forming a kind of rounded base on which it rested, like those celluloid toys with round, weighted bases which are called teeter-totters. Its balance, though, was not so perfect as a toy's. Any slight irregularity of surface, or at times a breath of air too small to be perceptible, would set it to rocking meditatively.

HE HAD picked it up on Vella Lavella. On a northwest corner of the island where the PT boat in which he and his cameraman were riding down to Tulagi had put in for minor repairs. Finding a trail going in from the jungle shore, he had ventured up it to stretch his legs.

A dark and steaming path, sprawling up over slippery ground among the roots of the giant trees, with the screaming of unseen parakeets and the horrible cut-throat gurgling of the lizards all about him. A quarter or a half mile up, the path had ended at the ashes of a burned native house, covering a twenty-foot circular space in the jungle.

The fire had happened some time ago. The charred smell had evaporated, and jungle vines and grasses had already begun to grow riotously over the blackened

ground. There was a human skeleton lying at the edge of the burned place, with an arm stretched out towards the center of it, and its skull split down the back. But whether the skeleton of a native or not, or even man or woman, he wasn't anthropologist enough to know.

It had been a tambu house, probably, he thought, because of its secluded location and its size. Ten feet in from the edge of the burned ground, following the direction of the skeleton's outstretched arm, he had seen the little god upon the ground.

It was nodding. Its sinister smile was on him. He had stepped towards it.

The fire which had consumed the house had left no marks upon it, unless part of its blackness was due to fire. It had felt surprisingly heavy for its size when he had picked it up.

It had obviously been abandoned or forgotten here for some weeks, and perhaps months. Whoever owned it might be dead. Still, Herbert had a highly-developed sense of property rights. Upon reflection, he had pulled out his purse and notebook. Extracting a ten-dollar bill, he had written on a page of the book:

To whom it may concern:

Am taking god as souvenir, and leaving bill in payment. Trust is satisfactory.

H. Creedy, Major, AUS

Battle Films Records

Special Service Div.

(Temporary)

That was simple enough. Anybody could understand it, who could read. He looked for a place to leave the note and money. The best place seemed to be beneath the outstretched hand-bones of the skeleton, where they might be visible, yet not drift away. Squatting, he slid them, neatly folded together lengthwise, beneath the dead man's bony fingers. He stood up, with the idol in his hand, feeling that he had completed a transaction.

"Now you belong me," he told it.

He had heard no step behind him, but something had made him glance over his shoulder. There was a native in a lava-lava standing motionless just behind him, with white-limed hair like sugar frosting, and white lime streaks painted on his face. His hands were behind his back.

For a long moment he had stood looking over his shoulder. The devil-god in his

hand seemed to have grown terrifically heavy.

"What name belong you, big fellow?" he managed to articulate, slowly heeling around. "What thing belong hand belong you?"

The black man grinned, without reply.

Then, suddenly, his face contorted as Herbert turned to face him. He stared at the thing in Herbert's hand with gaping mouth and expanding eyeballs. With a wild screech, he seemed to leap six feet backwards. He turned and fled like a shadow among the trees, flinging out his hidden right hand, with a sharp-edged bolo in it.

The parakeets and lizards stopped a moment, and then resumed their screaming and gurgling. Herbert stood, gripping the devil-god, a little shaky yet. When strength was back in his knees, he went hurrying and sliding back down the slippery trail to the beach.

THE PT boys had laughed at him when he narrated the incident of the sinister native with the hidden bolo. They all carried bolos as a farmer carried a jack-knife or a mechanic carries a screwdriver. They all whitened their hair and painted streaks on their faces, too. The guy had probably been a deacon of the church, who had been terrified out of his wits by Major Creedy's own look of menace, thinking the major was going to attack him.

"The fact is, Major, I'd be scared myself if I saw you glaring at me," said the cocky young skipper with a grin. "You just have that kind of a face."

The skipper had admired the little carved idol, though, and had offered five dollars for it. When Herbert told him he had left twice that much in payment for it, the young skipper said that he had paid plenty. A native could live the rest of his life on ten dollars, and send all his sons to college. He could always carve himself another devil-god.

He had brought it back to give to Madeleine. She had come into his mind at once when he had seen the thing nodding among the ashes, with its malignant grin. She had a childish pleasure in fantastic and weird things which had often amused him, with his realistic mind.

He remembered how at times she would

tell him, when she came hurrying in a little late for dinner, that she had been at the Museum of Natural History over across Central Park again, spellbound among the vast cases of devil masks and demon gods, assembled there from all over the world. She would talk about them, breathlessly and with little shivers, as she hurried to get dinner together.

"They actually stare at you, Herbert! I saw their eyes MOVE! They were LOOK-ING right at me!"

"Soup again, witch?" he would say patiently, watching the labels on the cans she was opening to put on the stove, and feeling his stomach turn over a little inside him. "How about going out to eat this evening?"

"Oh, Herbert, you don't think I'm a good cook!"

"Sure," he would say. "Sure, you're wonderful. But let's go out tonight to some swell joint and make a party of it. You can tell me all about those funny faces at the museum and how they looked at you, without having to think of the dishes afterwards. If they did look at you, who can blame them? Your own fault for being so beautiful, witch."

"Witch" was the name he had always had for her. Bewitching was the word for Madeleine.

She had never been a good cook, though, God bless her. The domestic arts were beyond her dreamy mind. That had not prevented her from having fits of trying to be the efficient little housewife, preparing delicacies for her man, as domestic as hell. And he had suffered accordingly—until Dr. Burghwaite had put him on a special diet that last time, and insisted that he eat only in first-class restaurants thenceforth, otherwise he might not last long. . . .

He had actually taken the prognosis of the young medical fool seriously, and had been alarmed about himself. Which showed how much doctors really knew. The things he had eaten during these past months overseas! Some of it would have turned the stomach of a turtle. Yet his indigestion had completely cured itself. He had never felt better in his life.

He would like to have Madeleine see him, so healthy and strong. She would be amazed and delighted by the improvement in him. But there was no way of knowing

where she had gone, or how to go about finding her.

THE little black demon was continuing to nod enigmatically. Its look of smug omniscience was a little too much to bear. He put his hand on it a moment to stop its wobbling. But when he took his hand away, it began again.

"All right, Oscar," he said, as he took off his tie. "If you know so damned much, spill it. You savvy where Mary fellow belong me? Mary fellow with gold hair, her picture in other room on box-you-pound-him-he-cry? Let's see you do your stuff, Oscar."

It was ridiculous. Only a damned carved wooden thing. Still, as he watched it, the little black demon was nodding, it seemed to him, rather definitely and emphatically toward the window beside the desk.

The window opened out on a court of the apartment building, facing the identical window of the apartment across the hall. As he looked out, he saw a woman standing at the window opposite. She was hoisting the shade to the top, with a flabby white arm lifted—a fat, gray-haired woman in a flowered house-dress, with a fat, good-natured face. Having raised the shade, she turned and waddled off.

He remembered who she was—a Mrs. Blennerhassett, the wife of a regular Army colonel, who had moved into the apartment across the hall with two poodles a month or two before he had been ordered to Korea. He had seen her in the elevator or hallway once or twice—a good old sport, painted and frizzed and dressed like gay sixteen, with fat hands covered with diamonds, and a roguish, hilarious eye. Fifty years old if she was a day, and not letting it worry her. She had seemed to like the company of young people, he remembered—had always been having a young crowd in for cocktail parties, perhaps her nieces or nephews and their friends.

Madeleine had rather an aversion to making women friends, ordinarily. She liked to go alone to the museums and art galleries, the movies and other things. She didn't care for afternoon bridge, which most women were always playing. He remembered, however, that she had struck up something of a friendship with Mrs. Blennerhassett, and had mentioned a few

times having spent the afternoon with her.

Perhaps Mrs. Blennerhassett might know where she had gone. Perhaps, even—the thought suddenly struck him—she had moved across the hall to stay with the old girl, so they could keep each other company. She might actually be over there now. . . .

Rebuttoning his shirt, he went out to Mrs. Blennerhassett's door across the hall and rang the bell, half-expecting Madeleine to appear in person.

But it was only the old girl who opened the door, her billowing featherbed bulk uncorseted in her flowered housedress, her fat amiable face unpainted and shiny at this hour of the morning, her gray hair in steel curlers. She looked at him good-humoredly but blankly, while her poodles beside her sniffed across the threshold toward his knees.

"Yes?" she said.

"I'm looking for my wife," he explained. "I'm Major Creedy. Mr. Creedy, from across the hall. I just got back, and find she's away. I wondered if she told you where she was going?"

"The little lady across the hall?" she said placidly. "I thought she was a widow. No, I don't know where she is. I'm sorry. I didn't know she was away. You're looking for my sister, Mrs. Blennerhassett, I expect. She's gone away for the summer. I'm Mrs. Horkins, her baby sister, from Perth Amboy. She asked me to stay in the apartment to take care of the doggies for her."

"Then you don't know where she's gone?" he repeated.

"Emily? Oh, you mean your wife. No, I've never really met her. I don't know a thing about her. Would you like to come in for a cup of coffee?"

"No thanks, I can't just now," he said. "Sorry."

She smiled at him amiably, with her fat vacuous face, as he made his apologies and withdrew.

"You aren't so very bright, Oscar," he told the little demon when he got back to his bedroom.

He had been an idiot to act as if its swaying head might have meant anything. It didn't know where she was any more than a doorknob. Of course, he hadn't really supposed that it might know. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Where the Devil-God Leads

THEN he suddenly realized that it wasn't nodding at the window, after all. Rather, it seemed obvious as he observed it that it was nodding at something beside it on the desk. Indicating the telephone, perhaps.

It didn't mean a thing. But he was reminded that he should call up his office and let his secretary, Grace Meadows, know that he was back. She might know where Madeleine had gone.

He picked up the phone, called her.

"It's Major Creedy, Grace. Mr. Creedy. I just got in."

"Oh, Mr. Creedy!" she exclaimed, and her cool impersonal voice warmed for a moment. "This is a pleasant surprise! I've had all sorts of nightmares about something happening to you. Quite silly of me, of course. Are you all through now—back for good? I feel like celebrating. I'll have to go out and splurge myself to a double chocolate soda, or something like that."

"How have things been going, Grace?"

"Very well, Mr. Creedy. Or Major, as I suppose I'll have to call you from now on. 'One Man's Poison' is still playing to standing room only. 'You Slay Me' opens next week. Lieber feels that you did a wonderful job with it, and that it's bound to be a hit, too."

"Good," he said.

"You came back just in time," she told him. "Sam Lewis has just sent in three mystery scripts, and there's another batch from the Associated Producers in this morning's mail. They must have both forgotten you were away. They ask for a quick word, if you would care to take any of them. I was going to see if I could cable you."

"I'll be in after lunch and look them over," he told her. "By the way, do you happen to know where that little witch of mine is? She seems to have gone someplace."

"Mrs. Creedy?" she said, her tone aloof and cool. "No, I haven't seen anything of her. She did call up last week, asking me to send her next month's household check in advance. But she didn't say anything to me about going anywhere. Tomorrow is

your wedding anniversary, by the way, Mr. Creedy. I have it on my calendar. You wanted me to order flowers."

"Yes, I know," he said a little heavily. "That was why I stretched it to make it back. But she isn't here. Well, that's that. Never mind the flowers now. I'll take care of them myself when I've found her. Thanks. I'll probably be in by two o'clock."

So Grace didn't know where she was, either. Strike two for Oscar, he thought, hanging up.

THE swaying little demon had worked over, in its teetering, toward the desk edge. As if it hadn't been the phone that it had meant at all, but something else that it was trying to bring to his attention. Of course it was crazy. . . .

He picked up the three or four envelopes lying on the desk. The first-of-the-month light and phone bills, still unopened. An empty lilac-tinted envelope addressed to Madeleine in deep purple ink, in a small rounded hand, and smelling of lilac perfume. A circular letter from the Children's Charity addressed to him. His last letter to Madeleine written from Tulagi before he knew he would be home so soon.

He put the opened bills and the charity appeal to one side, and dropped the envelopes, together with his own letter, into the wastebasket beside the desk, while the little demon on the desk rocked more violently.

There was nothing else on the desk except the blotter. He lifted it, but the space beneath it was bare. Still there was a feeling tingling ridiculously down in his spine, like in a childhood game, that he was getting hot.

He jerked open the doors of the two cubbyhole compartments at the back of the little desk, with some force. But there was only a bottle of ink in one, and in the other a melange of pins and pen-points and rubber bands, bits of string, some last year's Christmas seals, a half-filled paper packet labeled *Rat Poison*, and a little horse-chestnut figure with a comical clamshell face and stick limbs.

He recognized it, with a smile of sentimental memory. The little funny-face which he had bought for Madeleine at the Pharmacy & Gift Shoppe in Quahaug when they had been at The Breakers on

their honeymoon. He remembered how childishly pleased she had been with it, the sparkle in her eyes, her exclamatory laughter.

"Why, it is positively DEAR! It DOES look so dreadfully comical! I am going to name it HERBERT!"

He hadn't known that she had it still. He took it out and looked it over, smiling. It did have his face, somewhat, when one looked for the resemblance, with the small pursed mouth, the small eyes, and the clam-shaped heavy jowls.

There was a pin stuck through the center of its small horse-chestnut body, for no good reason that he could see. He pulled it out with his fingernail. Inside, the nut was only green fusty dust. He dropped it into the wastebasket, along with the bits of string, the rat bait, and the old Christmas seals.

"Well, Oscar—"

The teetering little demon fell over, and plunged headlong down into the wastebasket.

He bent and lifted it out. On the bottom of the basket, beneath the envelopes and debris which he had thrown away, he saw a glossy, large-sized booklet, an advertisement of some sort. It had become wedged against the basket's sides, as such large flat booklets sometimes do, and had remained on the bottom when the basket had last been dumped out.

He read: *The Breakers*.

He set the little demon back on the desk, and fished the booklet out.

That must be the answer to her whereabouts now. It was so obvious, if it had only occurred to him. She had gone back up there to the Cape to spend their anniversary alone. A place where she could feel herself nearest in thought and remembrance to him on that day, thought separated physically by the greatest distance possible on earth.

He realized how little he had really known her, with all her seemingly light and transparent nature. A man may love and live with a woman, and still not know her. The date, the place had meant no less to her than to him.

Enclosed between the glossy leaves of the booklet, when he opened it, he found a letter from The Breakers that answered all his questions.

Dear Madam:

Replying to your inquiry of recent date, our rates for single room and bath, American plan, are from \$9.00 to \$14.50 per day, depending on location, etc., with ten per cent reduction by the week.

Trusting to be able to make reservation for you, we remain. . . .

The little demon sat motionless, surveying him with its carved crocodile smile.

"You win, Oscar," he said. "You all time smart fella."

He forced a laugh. The reason it had been nodding before, of course, was because the desk surface where he had first placed it had been imperceptibly not quite level. The reason it had stopped nodding, with its smug look now, was because the spot where he had replanted it was geometrically plane. Naturally. There was nothing in its head.

So purely by accident he had learned that Madeleine was at The Breakers.

IT WOULD have spoiled it if he'd phoned her, asking her to return. The only thing was to join her there, continuing the surprise. Calling up Grand Central, he learned that the daily Chicopee express left at 11:09, in little more than an hour. No reservations available on it, but he could take his chances of getting a seat in a coach.

He packed the little demon for Madeleine into his weekend bag, together with slacks, swim trunks, and other beach vacation accessories, and took a cab to his office, a block from Grand Central, to pick up the scripts from Associated and Sam Lewis. The office was closed. Grace had gone out to celebrate his return, no doubt, with her double chocolate soda. He could not wait for her. He filled his brief-case with the playscripts and left a note for her, telling her that he had been in and taken them, and would be in again with a report on them not later than next Monday.

He expected to arrive around six or seven, in time for dinner with Madeleine. Perhaps they'd have a bottle of champagne to celebrate his return, and he'd make an amusing ceremony of presenting the little demon to her.

His train from New York was delayed, however, by a freight derailment on the line; following which the last bus from Chicopee to Quahaug Beach broke down

along a lonely stretch of the salt marshes—marooning him, the only passenger, for hours in the night mist, while the hatchet-faced driver tried to shore up the broken rear-end with various ill-assorted pieces of driftwood, before finally walking back miles to find a phone.

As a last straw, when the replacement bus which was ultimately sent brought him into Quahaug around midnight, he found the village dead and dark, with a five-mile taxi drive ahead of him out to the inn. The Cape still went to bed at ten o'clock, it seemed, with a profound and vegetative slumber, as it had when Madeleine and he had spent their honeymoon at The Breakers six years ago.

Standing on the dark, narrow street in front of the post office where the rickety little bus had debarked him, he watched it skittering back up the road, half regretting that he had not stayed on it. He might have found some accommodation in Chicopee for the night, getting down to the business of the work in his briefcase, and finishing the trip in the morning. Madeleine would be asleep when he reached The Breakers now, anyhow. However, the tail-lights of the bus were receding, and it was too late for that.

Across the street from him there stood the silver-shingled, ramshackle old movie hall, with the Quahaug Pharmacy & Gift Shoppe next to it, and a dim light in the front office of the taxi-garage a few doors down. Carrying his bags, he crossed toward it.

The old movie shed had a sign above it, *Fish Pier Theater*. In the glass case in front there was a crudely lettered poster announcing some forthcoming amateur play called "Horror"—and probably well named. He was reminded that in the past two or three seasons Quahaug had become something of an amateur theatrical colony, a Mecca for budding poetic playwrights and other would-be dramatic geniuses. He had a professional's discomfort and dread at the thought of amateurs. He would do well to avoid them, if any were at The Breakers.

The Pharmacy & Gift Shoppe window contained its remembered tall glass urns, filled with red and blue water, flanking an assortment of clamshell necklaces and other souvenir novelties for the tourist trade.

The shell necklaces and little figures were primitive enough to have come from the Solomons themselves, he thought, though even more crudely done. They showed the link among people throughout the world. There is something of the primitive and simple savage hidden in even the most civilized men, he reflected. Even in himself, perhaps, to some remote degree.

Voodoo and medicine—they were well allied in the window that way. Those big jars of colored water typified the mumbo-jumbo which still surrounds the medicine man's profession, he thought. He had been off doctors ever since young Dr. Burghwaite had told him portentously, more than a year ago, that he would probably die in a short time of gastroenteritis, unless he watched himself carefully. Now, after six months of the hardest kind of living in Korea and the islands of South Pacific, he felt infinitely more fit than when he had left.

He passed on from the drugstore to the taxi-garage. The door was padlocked, and there was no one in the office. Only a night-light burning inside, above the office safe.

Except for that one light, the village was absolutely dark. There were no translucent signs advertising tourist homes and no other taxi places, nor any way to locate a driver and arouse him.

There was nothing to do but to set out to walk it to *The Breakers*, along the dark sandy road, beside the monotonous slap and hiss of the night ocean, past fog-veiled pine woods and beach-plum thickets, with the infrequent summer cottages that he passed looming vague and dark, and his bags growing heavier with every step.

AN UNGODLY hour to be arriving. He would miss Madeleine's look of dreamy blank surprise, the sudden little trill of recognizing rapture as he appeared in the door. He would lose out on the humorous ceremony of presenting the little demon. The champagne which they would have drunk together, would not now be drunk. Not in the same way, nor at that time. She had been long asleep by now. It would have been better if he stayed over in *Chicopee* until morning.

The inn's low-spreading wings were dark, looming solitary on the dune edge overlooking the sucking ocean. He passed

the beach-plum thicket at the edge of *Rotten Bottom* marsh, and was on the inn grounds. Only a dim light showed from the downstairs lobby as he went up the drive.

A station-wagon, lettered *The Breakers*, was parked in front of the veranda steps, with its luggage tailboard down. For the transportation of guests, probably, to and from the bus terminus in the village. If he had known of it, he might have phoned from *Quahaug*.

His bag felt like two hundred pounds. For the moment it did not seem to him that he could carry it the last few feet up the steps, not possibly, after carrying it so far. He set it down to change arms again, as he had done periodically during the long walk.

One of the snaps had sprung open. He closed it, and the other one sprang open. He closed them together, firmly. He picked bag and briefcase up again, and carried them up the steps and in.

The cozy lobby, with its flowered wallpaper, broadloom carpet, and chintz divans, had only a couple of lights lit in it as he shouldered in. A pewter wall-bracket glowed just inside the door at his right hand; the only other light was a gooseneck lamp on the white desk-counter across the room.

In the fireplace a wisp of smoke wafted straight up, motionless and pencil-thin, from a foot-deep pile of wood ashes. The potted palms and rubber plants in their china jardinières looked dead. A green-and-yellow parrot sat chained on its perch at the foot of the green-carpeted staircase, with its head beneath its wing. There was a dim bulb lit above the landing turn of the staircase.

Two or three bags were stacked at the left side of the door, a morocco bag and a couple of striped linen ones, with cardboard tags tied to their handles—luggage of some of last evening's arrivals which had not yet been carried to their rooms, or of some of tomorrow morning's early departures which had been brought down in readiness to carry out. He set his own bag down inside the door, on the right-hand side.

Behind the desk an ancient clerk sat sleeping on his stool, his withered bald head resting on the register, beneath the gooseneck lamp. His veined hands twitched like sleeping salamanders on the counter

beside his head. His breath gurgled as he slept.

"Good evening," Herbert said, standing at the desk.

THERE was a little nickeled push-bell on the counter. After a moment of waiting, he pressed it. The old man lifted his head with a jerk, with a blink and shake of his blurred watery eyes.

"Hey?" he said.

"Good evening," Herbert repeated.

"Have you a—"

He had been going to ask, "Have you a Mrs. Herbert Creedy of New York registered?" But it was unnecessary. A belated recognition had functioned in his mind. The morocco bag stacked with the others by the door, waiting to be carried up or out, was here. His retina had photographed the gilt initials stamped on it, *M. X. C.—X* for Xanda, the numerological name which he had taken for her middle one, with her childish love for the weird—and the room number tag on it, 215.

He would not want to wake her at this hour. She loved her sleep so, the little witch. It would spoil her day tomorrow.

"A room?" he said.

"We're filled up," said the old man querulously. "We're filled up to the brim. How many times have I got to keep telling everybody that?"

"That's all right," Herbert said.

"It's not my fault," said the old man. "Don't go a-blaming me. I never see so danged many people wanting a beach vacation. I haven't even got a room to sleep myself. I've got to double up on a danged army cot with George, the day clerk, in the attic, and he leaves everything stunk up with lilac water. At my age, it's not right."

"That's too bad," said Herbert. "It doesn't really make any difference about me for tonight. I have some reading I should do. I merely thought if you had—"

"Maybe in the morning," the old man said, relenting. "Maybe somebody will die, or something. What time is it, anyway? Gosh all blazes. Two o'clock. I didn't know it was eleven yet. It's danged near morning now. Maybe someone will check out in three more hours or so. There's sometimes one or two of them that leaves to catch the five-thirty bus at Quahaug, to make the New York express at Chicopee."

"How about room two-fifteen?" said Herbert. "Has that just been taken, or is it checking out?"

"Two-fifteen?" the old man said. "Single room and bath, ocean side, rate ninety-one forty-five a week, you mean? I think there's a lady has it."

He turned the register around.

"Yep," he said. "Mrs. Herbert Creedy of New York. Registered two days ago. I kind of recollect her. Quiet young lady with blonde hair, kind of dreamy-faced. No, she's not leaving that I know of. She paid up for the week. Seems to me she said she might stay for the rest of the summer."

"I see a bag of hers there by the door, is the reason why I asked," said Herbert. "I thought perhaps she had just arrived, or was going out."

"George must have brought it and them others down," the old man said. "I'm too old for porter work. Maybe they want to have them put in the storage-room out of the way. Maybe they want to send them back home by express. No, two-fifteen is staying, far as I know. But there may always be someone else. It's not my fault I haven't got anything for you now."

"That's all right," Herbert said again. "I like to work at night, anyway. Perhaps in the morning I can arrange for a cot to be set up, if nothing more. If you don't mind my sitting here in the lobby?"

"Help yourself."

With his briefcase in hand, Herbert turned from the desk. He selected a big club chair near the wall-light by the door, pulling it up beneath the glow of the double bulbs.

He laid his briefcase on his knees. He drew up a standing ashtray beside him. Extracting his cigar-case, he selected an Invincible, clipped the end and applied a match to it. He opened his briefcase, pulling forth one of the play-scripts.

The old man behind the desk across the room watched him for a few moments with blurred eyes, then gradually let his head sink down again.

CHAPTER THREE

Scenario for Murder

HHE HAD meant to get some of his reading done on the train. But the coach had been crowded and noisy, filled with grime, aisle luggage, nestling

lovers, paper lunchboxes, and sticky-faced clambering children—two of the latter, with their billowing mother, sharing the same seat with him.

And even more than that, there had been the tingling anticipation of seeing Madeleine again, touched with the small but nagging possibility that she might not be at The Breakers, after all—that she might not have got accommodations on her arrival, or might have found it too nostalgic there without him, and gone elsewhere; or might have stopped off somewhere else en route; or might have suffered some illness or amnesia, and have got to no destination.

He was not an imaginative man, Herbert Creedy. His professional skill demanded of him the antithesis of loose imagination. He was realistic, judicious, pragmatic. Still, it was too easy to think of Madeleine helpless, lost or hurt . . . with her wistful, tender smile clouded in vague mists before his eyes . . . with the sound of her gay, exclamatory voice rising and fading with the rumbling of the train wheels, running on and on with words that he could not quite understand. . . .

It had been like the time when he had felt so ill, lying in the hospital where young Burghwaite had brought him after his collapse, and seeing her face near him, hearing her voice that way, through a thick gray veil. An elusive intangible smile, the sound of some words which she was saying to him or Burghwaite which he could not understand, though he struggled to. That had been a hellish experience.

Anyway, he had her located now. She was close to him, beneath the same roof, in her room upstairs in room two-fifteen with bath and ocean view, with the lulling hiss and suck of the sea through the open window beside her, sleeping in the deep middle of the night. She would probably awake at her usual hour, about nine or ten o'clock, however early she had gone to bed, stretching her arms and yawning. She was a little cat for sleeping.

He would go up and surprise her then, standing in the doorway while she stared at him with blank incredulous eyes, with her hand motionless over the yawn that she was patting, not believing it was he. Then she'd spring up with her trill of joy and rush into his arms.

"Oh, Herbert, DARLING! This is the

most WONDERFUL thing that ever HAPPENED! On our ANNIVERSARY, too! Oh, HERBERT!"

And, "I've brought you a present, witch," he would say to her then.

"Oh, Herbert! WHAT?"

"Guess."

"Oh, Herbert, don't TEASE me! Let me HAVE IT!"

"This. I call him Oscar."

"Oh, HERBERT! He is WONDERFUL! Oh, Herbert, I LOVE him! It was so SWEET of you to GIVE HIM to me! . . ."

But that would be all of seven hours from now. Maybe eight. There was quietness in the meantime. He could give all the scripts a preliminary reading. Perhaps he would have time to read three or four thoroughly, if they seemed worth it. Associated Producers wanted a murder play badly, they had said in the letter he had read at his office. And Sam Lewis wanted one.

HERBERT flicked the ash from his cigar, an open script in hand. He glanced up.

The thin wisp of smoke still rose straight and motionless in the fireplace from the heap of dead ashes. The potted palms and rubber plants looked dead around the walls. The old man still slept with his head on the desk counter across the room, beneath the gooseneck lamp. At the foot of the green-carpeted staircase beside the desk, the green-and-yellow parrot still slept with its head beneath its wing. But he had a sense of something moving, drifting, or creeping. . . .

That was it! On the landing of the staircase facing him, halfway up, beneath the dim landing bulb, was standing a slight young man with dark hair and a pale face and shadowed eyes.

He was carrying a striped linen suitcase. For the instant he had paused with it, descending. He stood looking at Herbert Creedy, sitting by the door.

Herbert put his cigar back in his mouth and sucked in smoke.

"Good evening," he said.

"Good evening, sir," said the young man on the staircase. He descended a step tentatively.

"It's all right," Herbert said good naturedly. "He's asleep."

The young man came on down, with his eyes on Herbert. He came across the carpeted floor, walking on the outside edges of his feet, a little skittishly, carrying his bag in his off hand, looking at Herbert. He set his bag down with the three others stacked on the other side of the door, with his eyes on Herbert.

His dark hair was glossy and a little long, with a triple wave in it. He smelled somewhat of lilac. His pale face was in shadow, outside the light of the wall-bracket above Herbert's head, but the shadows there intensified under his eyes. He looked about twenty-one.

He paused there by the door, uncertainly.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said. "I didn't just understand your remark. Did you say something about being asleep?"

"The desk clerk," explained Herbert good-humoredly, blowing smoke. "I thought you were doing a bill-skip. I used to be a young fellow myself. I've had to try to get out with my bag, if I could, in more places than one."

"Oh, no, sir." The young man laughed dutifully. "I'm Mr. Sutts, George Sutts, the day clerk. I work here. I was just bringing down a guest's bag."

His pale face was a little damp. There was purple ink on his index and middle finger as he lifted his hand to smooth his rippling hair.

"Are you staying here long, sir?" he said.

"I don't know," said Herbert with a helpless chuckle, giving the answer expected of all American males. "You'll have to ask my wife."

"I mean, sir, are you sitting here long?"

"I've sworn an oath by all that's holy to sit here till I've found a good play," said Herbert. "One that knocks me right out of my chair."

"Oh, are you a playwright, sir?"

"Not a playwright. A play doctor."

"A play doctor? I don't understand."

"Most playwrights don't see their business perfectly," explained Herbert, a little bored, for he had explained it too many times before. "They are men of creative imagination. They leap off into the clouds without realizing it. They have a man ride a horse onto a stage, and then forget to take it off again. Or they make him ride off on a high horse, when there was no horse

on. They write dialogue that looks good on the page, but that would be mush if spoken. They put in some business that sounds swell, but that nobody could possibly get away with. They are the imaginers. It's hard for them to stick to mundane things.

"I have no creative imagination myself," he explained. "I can't think up characters. I can't think up plots. Any dialogue that I do is dull, if solid. But I have an exact sense of reality. My feet are planted on the ground. I know what can be gotten away with, and what can't. So I'm a play doctor, revising and making foolproof the ideas of more imaginative men. It may sound like a very trivial profession. It is, however, an essential one, I believe I may say—saving many good plays from failure, and keeping bad ones from being attempted at all."

He knocked the ash off his cigar and picked up the play script again, dismissing the youth. He had thought him somewhat amusing as a picture of Bill-Dodger Descending the Staircase. But a youth of that sort could amuse him just so long. He sucked on his cigar. He would have done with George Sutts.

"What do you charge for doing it, sir?" young Sutts said.

Herbert Creedy lifted his brows above his small inexpressive eyes. The youth had sunk down to a seat on the stack of bags. He had his hands locked together between his knees. There were little beads of sweat on his pale, shadowed forehead.

"Twenty-five per cent of royalties is my usual arrangement," he replied. "Provided, of course, that I think the thing is worth my attention."

"I've always been interested in writing plays myself, sir," George Sutts said, making a swallowing sound. "There's a play I'd sort of like to have you analyze for me—tell me whether it could be gotten away with or not."

HERBERT CREEDY shuddered. He should have been on guard. The Fish Pier Theater assemblage of aspiring amateur dramatists. He had forgotten their existence momentarily. Probably every hotel clerk, taxi driver, and restaurant waitress within twenty miles was an embryonic playwright. They would swamp him in no time, if they started in on him.

"Send it to my office sometime," he said.

"I'll give you my name and address, if you want."

"I'd sort of like to outline it for you, sir," George Sutts said, lacing his thin hands tightly, with the sweat upon his brow. "So long as you're going to be sitting here all night, anyway. It won't take long."

"What kind of a play is it?"

"It's a murder play."

"A formularized type," said Herbert Creedy. "A murder is committed. A menace is loose. There's a love theme between the lovely heroine and the stalwart, upstanding, unjustly suspected hero. For two acts. Act three, there's the solution, the killer's caught, the lovers clinch. I'm inclined to think the genre has been overdone. You can hardly have anything new to offer."

"But this one's different, sir."

"In the first place," said George Sutts, "there's the young fellow who's the hero. He's not just an ordinary type. He's a very good-looking and superior type, very sensitive and intelligent and charming. I call him—well, I call him Gordon. It's a good substantial name, simple and manly. He's a promising young playwright."

Herbert Creedy smiled. Most amateurs make their heroes playwrights or novelists, depending on whether they are writing plays or novels.

"Go on," he said.

"Well, there's a rich old girl who falls for him. I call her—well, I call her Mrs. Breed. Her husband is in the Army overseas. Say in Korea, or maybe Germany. It doesn't make any difference. He doesn't come into it, anyway. He's just a colonel or something overseas."

"Leave him out of it, if you don't intend to bring him into it," Herbert Creedy suggested. "Confine yourself to the characters of your play."

"Yes sir. Anyway, he's got dough, and she doesn't just have to live on his allotment. She's got a swell little apartment on—well, say Fifth Avenue in New York. All kinds of money to spend on a good time. Jewels that would knock your eye out. She's old enough to be Gordon's mother maybe, but she goes off the deep end for him. Bang, like that. He's an awfully attractive guy, naturally. All the women fall for him."

"Does he respond to her passion?" said Herbert Creedy, drawing on his cigar.

"Oh, he doesn't really respond, naturally. Who could fall for the old hen? She's as old as the hills and godawful. But he acts sweet to her, so as not to hurt her feelings. They have some parties together and good times. She doesn't support him, though. He's not a gigolo. Anyway, she thinks that men should have jobs. She just slips him a fifty now and then when he happens to mention he's broke. Naturally, being a gentleman, he takes them."

"Where's your love interest?" said Herbert Creedy.

"Well, then *she* comes in. She's young. A honey. What did I call the old dame—Mrs. Bless?"

"Mrs. Breed."

"All right, I call the girl—well, say Sue. She's just a knockout. Gordon goes off the deep end himself for her. There's nothing he wouldn't do for her. And she's just as crazy about him. It's love, bang-up love, between them. Of course, he doesn't let Mrs. Breed know about it. He doesn't want to hurt her feelings."

"Well, there you are. The guy, Gordon, takes a job out of the city for the summer, where he can do some playwriting and not work too hard. He pretends to Mrs. Breed that he's going to get an aircraft job in Wichita or Portland. After he's started on his job he gets Sue to come and join him. Everything is rosy. And then, bang, who do you think pops on the scene? Mrs. Breed. Just out of a clear sky. God knows how she happened to come to the same place. It was just a blind accident."

"You get the situation? There she is, on the scene before Gordon knows it, and she catches him and Sue together. Well, she starts in to talk nasty and to say she'd like the money back right away that she has loaned him, and that he is just a gigolo, and other things like that. And he just kind of gets annoyed at her, and kind of strangles her."

"He kills her?"

"Well, she kind of falls down limp on the floor, and doesn't breathe any more. She's dead, anyway."

For the moment George Sutts rubbed his thin palms together, swallowing.

"You have a rather unusual power of understatement," said Herbert Creedy. "Most amateurs overstate. That strangling scene could be very moving, played with restraint."

I can feel it." He drew appreciatively on his cigar.

"Yes," he meditated. "When your Gordon strangles Mrs. Breed and she kind of falls down limp—a very effective scene."

"Oh, nobody sees it happen," said George Sutts. "That would kind of ruin it. I mean it—it'd look kind of horrible. No one would like to see it. It's just something that has happened. Off the stage."

"What's the new angle that you spoke of in your play?" Herbert Creedy inquired.

"I want Gordon to get away with it," said George Sutts.

For the moment he shivered, sitting on the stack of bags. Rubbing his palms together, he regarded Herbert Creedy with his shadowed eyes.

"He's got to get away with it," he repeated. "He's the hero. He's an intelligent, good-looking young guy, with all his life ahead of him. He didn't mean to choke the old buzzard to death. He didn't mean to do it so hard, anyway. She had a lot of money and jewels with her, too, that he could use. He wants to go on having a good time. He's got to get away with it."

CHAPTER FOUR

Madeleine No More

HERBERT CREEDY drew on his cigar, rubbed his jowels and meditated. "Unusual," he said. "The critics might go for it. I don't think the public would like it at all, however."

"To hell," said young Sutts, "with the—I mean, just let's figure it out from that angle. How he can get away with it. So long as you are sitting here anyway, sir. Of course, if you want to get up and go, I don't want to take your time."

"That's all right," said Herbert Creedy. "You have posed a dramatic situation, and you want to know how to meet a technical problem. Does anyone besides Gordon know that he has done the murder?"

"Sue," said George Sutts, swallowing. "She knows it, naturally. She had to—she had to help. She and Gordon are just nuts about each other, though. So that's all right."

"How many people know about his previous connection with Mrs. Breed?" said Herbert. "They would bring him at once

under suspicion, realistically speaking, as soon as she is found dead."

"Nobody," said George Sutts. "Nobody knows at all. The old buzzard was cagey. She was head over heels with him, but she kept him under wraps. She didn't want her husband to hear about him, when and if he came home."

"What is the location of your murder scene?" said Herbert Creedy. "Some place outside of New York, you say, where he has taken a job for the summer and has had Sue join him, and where Mrs. Breed arrived unexpectedly. But in another city, or in the country? How long before the body will be discovered? What police are there to investigate the crime? What chance is there to conceal it completely? All those questions are a part of the scene, and must be considered, you understand."

"The kind of a place where it happens—" said George Sutts—"well, it's a kind of place like here. A kind of a beach hotel like The Breakers."

"A hotel like this," repeated Herbert Creedy. "Then of course the chambermaid comes in each morning. She will discover the body in the course of her duties, inevitably, even if no one happens on it before."

"Yes, sir," said George Sutts, straining. "That was one thing I was thinking if. I was wondering if it would be smart for him to lay her on her bed and put a bottle of sleeping tablets beside her, to make it look like suicide?"

Herbert Creedy shook his head.

"Very poor," he said. "They would analyze the stomach contents. It's murder obviously enough, anyway, with the broken trachea and other medical indications of how she had died. There are the finger marks alone, showing conspicuously in her flesh. They would be measured against the hands of everybody there, including Gordon's, presumably. And there you are."

"Yes, sir, I thought of that, too," said George Sutts, swallowing. "That's why I gave up the sleeping tablets. But what if she was found out in the ocean? The marks on her throat might be only rock bruises then. And maybe it would be days or weeks, and there wouldn't be much at all." He swallowed again.

"If you had your murder taking place beside the ocean, yes," said Herbert Creedy. "Though an ocean is difficult to stage. Since

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for reasons of your play, however, you have had it happen in the hotel, then you would have to get her down to the ocean. You can't go lugging dead bodies around. The desk clerk or people in the lobby might see you carrying her out."

"I thought of that," said George Sutts, rubbing his thin hands. "I thought perhaps he could kind of walk her out as though she was kind of drunk. You know, just kind of stumbling along, with his arm around her."

Herbert Creedy smiled.

"It's been used at times in movies or on the stage," he said. "However, it is always highly unconvincing. A dead body is not a living person. It is either rigid, or very soft. You can try using it as a device, of course. But nobody would believe you."

"I was afraid of that," said George Sutts. "Then I thought maybe of putting her body in a trunk and shipping it to California."

"It would be discovered en route," said Herbert Creedy. "Such things are only an additional advertisement and an additional challenge to the police. Unless Gordon is extraordinarily powerful physically—which I have not understood you to conceive him to be—then someone would have to help him with the trunk. Regardless of that, he must deliver it to an express office or an expressman, and sign for the valuation. The trunk itself must have been procured someplace. They know his face, they have his signature, and in any situation he can be traced. He had better jump into the ocean and drown himself rather than try anything like that."

"I figured that out myself," said George Sutts, swallowing.

HERBERT took out his cigar and looked at it. It had gone dead.

"I find the situation dramatically interesting," he said. "The technical problem. You have a gift of creating character, undoubtedly. You have made it very vivid. Much more so than the ordinary play. I can almost see Gordon. I don't think the public would like it at all. But just as an intellectual problem, I'd like as much as you to figure out how he would get away with it. "Suppose—"

He chewed on his cigar.

"Suppose you had him cut the body

When the Devil-God Smiled

up and put it in some ordinary luggage bags," he said. "He could carry them out one by one, without being noticed at all. Suppose there's some place nearby like Rotten Bottom Swamp below, that dogs and even cows used to be lost in, before it was fenced off. Then you could have him take the bags down there and heave them over the fence, and that's an end of it. Of course it would take several bags, and you might have some difficulty fitting in the head. But it's the way to do it."

"That's the way I'm doing it," said George Sutts. "With a hatbox for the head."

Herbert Creedy nodded appreciatively.

"The hatbox is a nice touch," he said.

"Yes, that makes it perfect. Nobody knows that Gordon ever knew Mrs. Breed. Maybe nobody knows that she has come to his hotel. She has just disappeared. He's got her money and jewels, and his girl. The girl is in it with him, and she'll never squeal. He's got away with it."

"God!" he said, using an expletive which he seldom used. "It's the damndest play I ever heard of! What ghastly people!"

George Sutts had arisen. Sweat was on his face. He looked at Herbert Creedy with his hollow, shadowed eyes. He swallowed.

"Would you mind moving your chair, sir?"

"Moving my chair?" said Herbert.

"You are blocking the door," said George Sutts in his soft, dead voice. "Didn't you know it?"

Herbert Creedy looked around him, with a surprised and baffled face. It was, he saw, a fact. In drawing up the big club-chair under the wall-bracket, he had let three or four inches of it protrude over the door edge.

His bag on the floor, too. He had pushed it over, and it was right in front of the door.

"Why, I beg your pardon!" he said, arising and pulling at the chair. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought you were sitting here on purpose," said George Sutts, swallowing. "When you said you weren't going to move till you found a play that knocked you over, I thought you meant it. Thanks."

He picked up the bag he had brought



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down, and tucked it under his left arm. He picked up one of the three stacked by the door, and caught it up under his right arm. He did it rather swiftly. He stooped and picked up the other two bags in his hands. With his foot he shoved Herbert Creedy's bag out of the way, and caught a hooked finger on the doorknob and opened it.

In the fireplace ash-buried embers caught and begun suddenly to blaze. The dusty palm-trees in their pots seemed to shiver and stir green, like jungle trees after a drenching rain. The gurgling of the old man sleeping at the desk was like the gurgling of cutthroat lizards. The parrot sleeping on its perch at the staircase lifted its head and screamed.

The snaps of Herbert Creedy's bag had sprung open as George Sutts kicked it, spilling forth its contents. From amidst the melange of shirts, socks, swim-trunks, beachrobe and toilet-case, the little black demon rolled forth, and stood nodding on the floor, leering at Sutts with its crocodile grin.

George Sutts gave it one terrified glance, with eyes dark as dead coals, with face as white as paper. Clutching and gripping his load of bags, he went rushing out the door.

HERBERT CREEDY clung to the arm of the chair that he had pulled out of the way. His blood was like water.

That play had gripped him, damn it. It had been so horrible—the murder of that poor woman, the wife of a man serving overseas, by a cheap Lothario, while perhaps his little hussy of a sweetheart watched and cheered him on. It had been so vivid—his scheming how he could dispose of her body, planning how he would use her money and her jewels. . . .

Madeleine, he realized, was thirty years old now. She might seem like an old hag, he didn't know, to a pin-feathered boy like that. Her household allowance, her nice but simple little jewels, though no more than his moderate prosperity allowed, might seem like vast wealth to George Sutts.

The purple ink on the fellow's fingertips, like the purple ink on that empty envelope, lilac-tinted, on Madeleine's desk!

And the fellow had taken out her morocco bag, too!

When the Devil-God Smiled

Oh, God! Madeleine, with him away, turning blindly for affection where she might find it, to become the victim of a ghastly hyena like that! . . .

He didn't know how he had got up the stairs. But he was standing in the green-carpeted corridor, in front of one of the white doors which had the numerals 215 on it, pounding on it with something that he had in his hand. He gripped the knob and lunged against it.

"What on EARTH do you want? Who on earth ARE you?"

Madeleine's voice!

What a fool he had been!

His limbs felt about to collapse with sheer nerve exhaustion. He looked down at his hand—at what he had been using to knock on the door. It was the little devil-god. He must have picked it up from the floor. He smiled at it weakly.

He must be calm; not show her what an emotional, excited fool he had been. "Hello, witch," he said. "It's Herbert."

"HERBERT!"

"Sorry to wake you up at this ungodly hour," he said. "It's really me, though. I got back. Can you let me in?"

"Oh, Herbert, DARLING! I can't BELIEVE it!"

She was turning the bolt. The door opened. She stood there. With her little trill of joy, she rushed up against his chest as he stepped in.

Her blonde hair was tousled and damp beneath his chin. She had on a bathrobe.

"I wasn't REALLY asleep," she said. "You can SEE I haven't been to bed yet. I had just finished taking a BATH. I felt so STICKY. Oh, Herbert, I must have had a PREMONITION you were coming! I felt it in my BONES! How on EARTH did you find me here?"

"Just a hunch, witch," he said, keeping his voice calm. "Came home and you weren't there. I had a hunch you must have come up here for our anniversary."

"It IS our seventh anniversary, ISN'T it?"

"The sixth," he said. "Since midnight."

"Oh, Herbert, you always get things so STRAIGHT. You seem AGITATED, darling. I can feel your HEART beating."

"I just had a play told to me by a would-be playwright," he apologized. "A youth-

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Joel Townsley Rogers

ful Ancient Mariner who got hold of me. It certainly was a ghastly one. It scared me."

SHE drew back from him, with her hands upon his chest, looking up at him with a question in her eyes.

"Really?" she said. "Herbert, what WAS it?"

"Nothing," he said. "Forget it. I brought back something to give you, witch. Do you like it?"

He lifted his right hand, with the little demon in it. The devil-god leered at her, as it had at Sutts, and before him, at the lime-smeared black man on Vella Lavella with the murder-sharp bolo in his hand. . .

Madeleine opened her mouth to scream.

In that instant, across her shoulder, he glanced again at the hatbox sitting on the bed. A hatbox with E. B. on it.

He had seen it the instant he stepped in. Emily Blennerhassett, without any doubt. Mrs. Blennerhassett, the poor blank-brained gay old sport, with her fondness for young people, with her cocktail parties and her frizzed hair and paint and her sixteen-year-old clothes. With her money and her diamonds. Mrs. Blennerhassett had been Mrs. Breed. Her poor painted face was in that bag now. . .

This was Sutts' precious Sue standing before him—Madeleine.

He thought of his illnesses, of the soups which Madeleine had fed him, of young Dr. Burghwaite's gravity and alarm. He thought of the rat poison he had found.

And he thought of the little horse-chestnut figure with the clam face which he had bought her on their honeymoon, while she had been shopping for something at the drug counter of the Pharmacy and Gift Shoppe, perhaps already buying rat poison. The little figure which she had named Herbert, and which she had stuck a pin through.

He thought about Madeleine, up long past her usual bedtime, having just taken a shower. . .

He thought of littler and lesser things. Of her coming rushing in so often and so late, saying that she had been at the museum again. He realized now that the museum closed at five o'clock. He thought of many things.

But perhaps he had thought of them be-

When the Devil-God Smiled

fore, in the back, of his mind, and for a long time. Perhaps he had thought them over thoroughly, and to the last bitter drags. Perhaps he had been thinking of them when he had picked up the little devil-god there on Vella Lavella to give her. He had been thinking of her, yes. And the black man had a look at his face, and had been terrified.

She had tried to murder him from the first, for what money he had, for his insurance. She had deceived him. He had been almost twice her age when they married. He should have known; he should have expected it.

Anyway, he had brought back the demon to give her.

This was Madeleine! This was Madeleine, his lovely Madeleine, with her tender, wistful smile, her golden hair, her wide, innocent eyes. But soon it would be Madeleine no more. . . .

Even in that moment, with his realistic mind, Herbert Creedy knew that he could get away with it. He hadn't told Grace at the office where he was going; she would assume he had merely taken the scripts to read at home, and by law between them he was not to be disturbed while reading. When he had brought them back, read, she would be willing to swear to his alibi, with conviction.

But even that was not necessary. No one would remember him on the crowded train. The hatchet-faced bus driver, half asleep, and the other half of his mind without wits, would not be able to identify him. Nor the sleepy old man downstairs, to whom he had not given his name.

Only George Sutts would remember him. But George would remember him to his regret. Madeleine would have love letters in her baggage from George Sutts, undoubtedly, and this thing could be pinned very easily on George.

Yes, he could get away with it, he knew, with his realistic and pragmatic mind. He knew it without question. Perhaps he had thought it all out before. But he didn't know if he wanted to get away with it. It made no difference to him now. Nothing did.

This was Madeleine. But Madeleine no more. . . .

THE END



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Frank Ward

(Continued from page 28)

Bayliss hit-and-run. No, everything about the way this murder was done pointed to you, Brady. That and the phone that wasn't here. Only Nancy and I knew that. Nancy and I and the man who came out in the dark foggy night to kill her. Just the three of us."

He nodded, but I knew he wasn't listening. He said, softly, "We can make a deal on this, Pete. We can smooth it out."

"Sure," I said, laughing. "For you, always the deal. Make this one with the man who drops the cyanide pill into the bucket of acid under your chair, Brady. See if he'll listen to you telling him that she wasn't worth any career you had in mind. See if he'll give you another minute of breathing for that."

I let the cigarette tumble from my lips. I went on, "It must have been a tough spot for a man like you, fastidious and careful and ambitious, to find that she was a rope around your neck. You couldn't just walk out on her because the scandal would ruin you, and yet, when you killed her, you couldn't pin it on me because you needed me and I wouldn't be any good to you dead. What's in your mind now, Brady?"

His eyes came up to meet mine. I saw the flicker in them and brought my hand off the table with the .45 automatic in it and threw the gun at him in one unbroken overhand motion. He screamed a high penetrating scream, spilling blood down the front of his coat, and fell back against the wall, pawing foolishly for his gun. He didn't get it out before I hit him.

I hit him with all I had, and then I hit him again. He didn't have a chance to fight back. He fell back against the wall, whimpering a little, and I grabbed his coat and held him up. I wanted to kill him, but when he sagged, I let him go. He slid down the wall and I stepped back, rubbing my knuckles to get the feel of him off me, to get the dirtiness out of my mind.

A hand touched my shoulder, and I jumped. It was Henderson. There was a knot on his head the size of an egg. He walked over to Devlin and prodded him with his foot. Then he turned to me and nodded, very slowly, and I knew he had overheard enough.

THE END

Three for the Kill

(Continued from page 63)

while you were in Paris that Mary Collins was seeing Thompson, Catlett and maybe others. That burned you; you figured that she was your private date."

Darrow bent forward in protest; faint lines of strain appeared around his eyes.

"Oh, yes," insisted Ryan. "We've been through your correspondence and hers too. She didn't agree with you; she reserved the right to go out with anyone she liked. When you couldn't settle the issue from overseas, you flew here, taxied to her apartment house—we've located the cab driver, by the way—went through the service entrance, made your way up the rear stairs and used the key Miss Collins gave you some time ago. You entered her apartment, found her there and continued the argument. When she still refused to stop seeing other men, you lost control of yourself, beat her and then—" Ryan's words fell in slow, deadly sequence—"strangled her to death."

"You can't prove a thing!" Darrow shouted. "It's all guesswork. What you've said would fit anyone. I never went near her apartment Saturday night."

Ryan stared coldly at the sweating man. "I'd figured out how it was done; you told me who did it."

"I?" gasped Darrow.

The sergeant pointed a muscular finger at him. "You talked too much. Miss Collins always had her place done by a firm of decorators. The walls had been gray and the furniture and drapes maroon. But she wanted a change, so the walls were painted dark green on Saturday, the day of the murder. The old maroon furniture and drapes were still there; the new ones in the proper colors were to have been installed today. The others I questioned recalled the walls as gray. But you, you talked too much; the color of the walls grated on your temperament; you had to talk about it. And when you did, you put yourself right in that apartment the night of the murder."

I watched Darrow as he was led away, then turned to Ryan.

"I told you, Hal," he remarked matter-of-factly, "that this would be an easy one to figure."

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Ready for the Rackets

(Continued from page 8)

big, adorable, dimpled doll with luxurious curls framing her face. I was totally unprepared for the sick-looking thing that arrived.

Sure, the arms and legs were miracle skin, but they should have said miracle *skinny*—they were so thin they looked spider-like dangling from the stuffed body. The hair probably does "curl, wave, comb and wash"—what there is of it. She is completely bald in spots. I never did like crying babies so I suppose I should have been relieved that this one, contrary to specifications, does not utter a sound. My problem is: should I risk admitting to my trusting little daughter that Daddy is a sucker, or should I put all the blame on Santa Claus?

R. H. Pointer
Albany, Oregon.

Taken for a Ride

Dear Sir:

It was easy to tell we had made a round of the London pubs but I didn't realize, until later, that these sharpies knew we were Americans because we didn't wear hats. Anyway, soon after Sparks, the radio operator, and I had settled into a train compartment on our way back to the ship, these three fellows got in with us.

Soon one commented about the American boxer licking an Englishman the night before. It seemed they all agreed that Americans were better fighters. I began to think these English were fine fellows.

A few stops later a fellow got in with us and he wasn't long in whipping out a scarf, laying three cards on it, and shifting them around, lightning fast, like the pea in the old shell game. One Englishman pooch-pooched the whole thing and went back to his newspaper. Another wouldn't put up any money but constantly picked the winning card, ace of hearts, just to taunt the gambler. The Englishman on my right was an interested but impartial spectator. That is, he was . . . until the gambler dropped the ace of hearts on the floor, face up. Then he whispered excitedly, "Did you see that? He bent that card picking it up! Put up a pound note and beat the silly fool!"

He kept at me until I did. I reached for the bent card, with my pound note clutched unsteadily in my other hand. Wot happen? It was the queen of spades. The pound note disappeared into the gambler's pockets and all four tipped their derbies and got off at the next station. I'd been initiated in the fine points of Three Card Monte.

Samuel Rauworth
Chicago, Ill.

Fill 'Er Up!

Dear Sir:

One night just before closing time a man in his shirt sleeves came walking into my nephew's service station and said he had run out of gasoline a few hundred yards before reaching there. He had my nephew fill a five-gallon can he

Ready for the Rackets

brought with him, then searched his pockets for money.

Finally he turned and with a sheepish grin said: "Well, I guess I left my billfold in my coat when I got out to push the car. Anyway, I'll need to fill the tank, so I'll pay you when I come by."

Since he had an honest-looking face, my nephew let him go. That was the last he heard of the friendly stranger until officers caught the man several hundred miles away in the opposite direction next day.

He proved to be an ex-convict who had driven all the way from California to Texas on borrowed gasoline. He would drive by a station at night, size up the place, then drive a quarter mile farther on and turn around. If the station attendant accompanied him, he would pay for the gasoline. If the loss were phoned in to officers, they would be looking in the opposite direction for him.

He would probably have gotten to the East Coast if he hadn't made an illegal turn in traffic. The car he used the free gasoline in had also been borrowed—without the owner's permission.

Jess F. Blair
Lamesa, Texas.

Jolted and Jobless

Dear Sir:

I was looking for a job in the big city when a smiling, neatly dressed man spoke to me. "Looking for work, kid?" he asked.

I assured him that such was the case. He then explained the set-up. He was leaving his job for a better one and would recommend me to take his place.

He talked me into putting up my last five dollars as a down payment on a "uniform." He took me into a nearby building and introduced me to the "foreman," handing him the envelope containing my five-spot.

The foreman explained that he wished to write down for me the address of the job I was to apply for; then he handed me the addressed envelope. I noted it was a place about ten blocks uptown. On arriving there I found there was no such job in existence. Then I looked inside the envelope! You're right. It was an empty envelope!

R. N. M.
Park Ridge, N. J.

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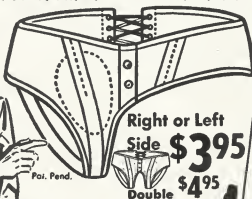
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wrote us to know he is "very pleased with my Rupture-Easer. It has given me great relief and I feel more safe than ever in wearing this support."

Mr. R. of Anderson, Ind., thanks us and says: "It is one of the finest things I have ever worn and has made my life worth living. It has given me untold ease and comfort."

Mr. D. S. of Greenwich, N. Y., writes: "I find my Rupture-Easer the most comfortable and satisfactory of any truss I have ever worn."

Mrs. L. M. C. Blackburn, Mo., writes: "The Rupture-Easer I bought from you has done so much good I couldn't forget you this Christmas season."

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CHOOSE . . .

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☐ 18 MOST LOVED HYMNS
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18

Brand New Discovery — 6-
IN-1 Vinylite **BREAK-Resistant** Records — Play Up
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18 TUNES!

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Value
For \$2.98
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\$13.04

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SUPPLY LIMITED. That's why we urge you to fill in and mail coupon now! Play these 18 selections ordered, use the **NEW GIFT** sure saving needle, for 10 days at home. If you are not delighted, if you don't feel these are the **BEST SOUNDING** records for the price, return within 10 days for **FULL REFUND**. Don't delay, send \$2.98 in check or money order, or put three one dollar bills in the mail with this coupon and **SAVE POSTAGE**—DON'T DELAY, MAIL COUPON TODAY!

FREE!

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18 HIT PARADE TUNES

Ominous
Undecided
Cold, Cold Heart
Breeze Of You
It's No Sin
Owen Yonder
I Get Ideas
Slow Poke
Cry
Just One More
Chance



Tell Me Why
Turn Back The
Hands Of Time
The Little White
Cloud That Cried
Charmaine
Anything
Shrimp Boats
Be My Life's
Companion

18 HILL BILLY HITS

It Is No Secret
May The Good Lord
Bless and Keep
You
Mr. Moon
Give Me More,
More, More
Makin' Mama
From Memphis
Baby We're Really
In Love
I Wanna Play House
With You
Hey, Good Lookin'



Alabama Jubilee
Let's Live a Little
Always Late
Cryin' Heart Blues
Cold, Cold Heart
Somebody's Been
Beatin' My Time
Slow Poke
Let Old Mother
Nature Have Her
Way
Crazy Heart
Mom And Dad's
Waltz

18 MOST LOVED HYMNS

The Lord's Prayer
Onward, Christian
Soldiers
What a Friend We
Have In Jesus
Church In The
Wildwood
In The Garden
Faith Of Our
Fathers
There Is Power In
The Blood
Leaning On
The Everlasting Arm
Since Jesus Came
Into My Heart



Trust On Me
Jesus Keep Me Near
The Cross
Softly And Tenderly
Dear Lord And Father
Of Mankind
A Mighty Fortress
Sun Of My Soul
Just A Closer Walk
With Thee
It Is No Secret
What God Can Do
May The Good Lord
Bless And Keep
You

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18 Hit Parade ☐ 18 Hill Billy
Tunes \$2.98 Hits \$2.98
☐ 18 Hymns \$2.98 All Three Groups \$7.95

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